

The New Criterion

June 2003

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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Camille Paglia, "The Mighty River of Classics"
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Notes & Comments:

June 2003

The New York Times *at bay*

By now, most readers will have had their fill of *l'affaire Blair*—the story of Jayson Blair, the twenty-seven-year-old black reporter for *The New York Times* who for five years lied, fabricated interviews and datelines, and plagiarized the work of other journalists.

Mr. Blair, who came to the *Times* as an intern in 1998, resigned on May 1. On Sunday, May 11, the *Times* ran an extraordinary two-part feature on Blair's career. It began on the front page, above the fold, and filled four full pages inside. The fourteen-thousand word behemoth—the longest news story in the *Times* we can remember—was part exposé, part *mea culpa*, part angry self-justification. "Let's not begin to demonize our executives," said Arthur "Pinch" Sulzberger, Jr., the *Times*'s publisher, "either the desk editors or the executive editor or, dare I say, the publisher." (Executives implicated in the recent corporate scandals must be grateful for the *Times*'s highminded reluctance to demonize those it reports on.)

The *Times* is a rich organization with immense resources. When it goes all-out on a story—as it did, for example, on the terrorist attacks of September 11—you sit up and take notice. Teams of reporters fill page after page with on-the-scene news stories; pundits offer detailed analysis; then there are the diagrams, interviews, pictures, not to mention numerous human-interest side dishes.

We are told that Howell Raines, the *Times*'s Executive Editor, calls this form of journalistic blitzkrieg "flood-the-zone" reporting. Perhaps "shock and awe" would be more to the point. Friedrich Nietzsche spoke of "philosophizing with a hammer." Here we had journalism with a bludgeon. The stunning front-page story about Blair began with the admission that "A staff reporter for *The New York Times* committed frequent acts of journalistic fraud while covering significant news events in recent months." At last count, thirty-six of the seventy-odd stories Blair had filed since last October were tainted.

He fabricated comments. He concocted scenes. He lifted material from other newspapers and wire services. He selected details from photographs to create the impression he had been somewhere or seen someone, when he had not.

Assembled by a platoon of reporters and researchers, this unburdening was clearly intended as a sort of preemptive strike, a cathartic gesture, a Clintonian "Let's put this behind us and move on" gambit. In emetic little moments that punctuated the indictment, readers were told about "the pain resonating through the *Times* newsroom" and Jayson Blair's "distinctive laugh" and "serious charisma." At a closed-door meeting for *Times* staffers on May 14, Howell Raines assured his audience that

"I'm here to listen to your anger, wherever it's directed." The inner child speaks.

Whatever else it was, the *Times's* ostentatious pretence of "coming clean" was a bid for absolution. "Mr. Blair harmed more than himself," the *Times* acknowledged. "Although the deceit of one *Times* reporter does not impugn the work of 375 others, experts and teachers of journalism say that *The Times* must repair the damage done to the public trust." "Experts," "teachers of journalism," the *Times* newsroom—and many, many readers.

As of mid-May, however, the *Times's* response to Jayson Blair's campaign of deception has not repaired any damage. On the contrary, the ostentatious spectacle of self-inquiry and self-criticism has had the opposite effect, feeding rather than dousing the flames of criticism. *The New York Post* carried a photograph of one protestor, dressed up as "Baghdad Bob," the former Iraqi Information Minister, carrying a large placard that read: "Former New York Times Reporter Will Lie for Food." Indeed, far from clearing the air, the effect of its campaign has been like one of those oil-filled trenches with which Saddam Hussein surrounded Baghdad. Set afire, they were meant to conceal, disorient, and protect. But the resulting smoke screen, though noxious, served only to highlight the malevolence and vulnerability of the despot and his regime.

So it is with the *Times's* performance. There are, it seems to us, two principal issues. The first has to do with what Howell Raines calls the *Times's* "commitment to diversity," i.e., politically correct "affirmative action." Both Raines and Gerald Boyd, the *Times's* Managing Editor, have aggressively pushed affirmative action programs at the paper. Boyd, himself black, has long been perceived as the paper's "race czar," exercising veto power over coverage of all issues that impinge upon race.

As we have had many occasions to observe in this space, "affirmative action" is an emollient phrase that means "racial, sexual, or ethnic discrimination when practiced by liberals." Two years ago, in an address to the

National Association of Black Journalists, Raines dilated on the *Times's* experiments with affirmative action. Citing Jayson Blair by name, he proudly announced that "This campaign has made our staff better and, *more importantly*, more diverse." Emphasis added. But the preposterousness—the idea that diversity is more important than quality—is in the original. No wonder *The New Republic*, reporting on the Blair Affair, accused the *Times* of the "fetishization of diversity."

When the scandal broke, the *Times* denied that race had anything to do with Jayson Blair's employment and rapid promotion. Raines denied it. So did Boyd. But then in the next breath was an acknowledgment that race was a central ingredient. Sentence number one: Blair got the sought-after internship "because of glowing recommendations," "not because he is black." Sentence number two: "The *Times* offered him a slot in an internship program that was then being used in large part to help the paper diversify its newsroom." Got that?

Many editors had complained about the huge number of errors in Blair's work. They complained about his sloppiness, his attitude, his absences. There were reprimands, memos to his file. But nothing serious was done. In April 2002, Jonathan Landman, the metropolitan editor, emailed newsroom administrators: "We have to stop Jayson from writing for the *Times*. Right now." Apparently, Howell Raines never saw that email: why not? Blair's behavior and performance were consistently appalling. It turns out that he was never even graduated from the college that had provided such "glowing recommendations" when he applied for an internship. The *Times* just "assumed" that he had. He was held to a different standard, a lower standard. Why? In part, because he was a darling of the *Times's* top brass. In part, because he was black.

The black journalist William Raspberry touched on the essential point in *The New York Post*. Back in the 1960s, he admits, he

himself may have been hired partly because he was black. But he knew he was bright, he worked hard, and he knew he could compete on equal terms with all of his colleagues. What can explain the case of Jayson Blair—why his stories and credentials weren't checked, why his failures were overlooked? "Don't you see?," Raspberry asked. "It's because of affirmative action."

"Affirmative action"—i.e., liberal discrimination—is the enemy of the equality it pretends to nurture. It depends upon and encourages a double standard. In fact, it encourages a *double* double standard. Jayson Blair was unfairly singled out—twice: first for advancement, then for repudiation (what Sulzberger abhors as "demonization"). Would the *Times* have gone into "flood-the-zone" mode had Blair been white? We doubt it. But special favoritism requires special explanation.

The larger issue concerns the ingrained ideological bias of which affirmative action and the cult of diversity are merely currently fashionable expressions. The *Times* grandly announced that Jayson Blair's behavior represented "a low point in the 152-year history of the newspaper." Hardly. The Blair Affair, depressing though it is, pales in comparison with many other items from the paper's history. Consider the career of the Pulitzer-Prize-winner Walter Duranty. Duranty, who was head of the *Times's* Moscow bureau in the 1930s, was an apologist for Stalin. Accordingly, he assured readers that, though there were some occasional food shortages, there was "no actual starvation" in the Ukraine. This was in the midst of what Robert Conquest has called the Great Famine, the Stalin-made horror in which *millions* were systematically starved. Or consider Herbert Matthews, another communist fellow traveler, whose forty-five-year career at the *Times* included dutiful misreporting from the Spanish Civil War and, later, writing such fulsome encomia about Castro that one wag portrayed the dictator with a sign saying "I got my job through *The New York Times*." The truth is that the *Times*, despite its enormous reputation, is constitu-

tionally disposed to embrace the current politically correct line whatever it is—on race, on international affairs, on culture, on politics. In 1966, *The New York Tribune* went out of business, leaving the *Times* essentially without competition. It is said when news of the *Trib's* demise came, several long-time editors at the *Times* broke down in tears. They saw that the death of one paper would encourage the intellectual corruption of the other. How right they were.

How we do it

As we conclude our twenty-first year of publication, we would like to answer a question we are often asked: namely, How do we do it? *The New Criterion* has a tiny staff: how do we manage to bring you some of the freshest, best written, and most illuminating criticism anywhere month after month, year after year? There are two parts to the answer. One is our writers. We are fortunate indeed in having been able to attract such good writers: young, old, and in-between. It is they who fill our pages and make us grateful as much for their engaging prose as for their fructifying insights.

But that is only part of the answer. The other part concerns the growing family of friends who support *The New Criterion*. It is gratifying to be able to take this opportunity to thank them publicly: the several foundations who first made our work possible, and those many individuals who have helped us in more recent years. We would like to thank in particular all those belonging to the Friends of *The New Criterion*, especially those who helped us with major special events this year: Paul Healy, Joseph and Sharon Hartmann, Donald and Patricia Oresman, Carol Selle, and William and Arete Warren. We wish also to thank C. B. Wright for his generous long-term support. And we are grateful above all to Donald Kahn, whose extraordinary generosity has helped secure the future of *The New Criterion*. To all of you we offer our profound thanks.

“Christophobia” and the West

by Kenneth Minogue

Public policy in a democracy rests upon public opinion, which in turn rests on public feeling. The feelings people have towards remote and abstract objects such as states and categories are normally pretty stable, but when they do change, they resemble earthquakes in the political world. Shelby Steele has recently been writing of the revolution in public feeling that took place in America in the 1960s, when white racism was replaced by white guilt. Whole new social and moral structures have been thrown up. The appearance of anti-Americanism in Europe in the wake of 9/11 is less fundamental, but is also in many respects a revolution of feeling. Israel has found itself buffeted by this change. My concern is with another shift in recent sentiment, less dramatic but in my view no less significant. It is the rising hatred of Christianity among Western peoples, which I shall call “Christophobia.”

I am not, of course, talking of secularism. Scepticism about Christianity largely began in the eighteenth century and increased steadily throughout the twentieth. It is hardly surprising that a revelation couched in the idiom of a remote past and purporting to reveal the transcendental aspects of the human condition could not survive the coming of what we may call “the scientific world view,” in which truth is tested by empirical confirmation. Much of Christianity has responded to this development by retreating into a modernist accommodation

with what it takes to be science. It has generated the ecumenical movement, a kind of deism (if I understand it rightly) in which all religions are treated as variant responses to the one divine creation.

Secularism, then, is not at all puzzling. It leads one to expect that Christianity would slowly fade away, leaving Christians to their services and secularists to long Sabbath mornings with the Sunday papers. There are indeed exceptions to this general picture of accommodation mitigating decline. Christianity remains a cause of violent conflict in places like Northern Ireland. In the United States, there is trouble at the interface where evangelicals and Roman Catholics encounter feminism and abortion clinics. The Catholic Church remains resistant to the march of modernity in some striking respects, but it too has long been on the defensive, and liberation theology leaves ecumenism panting behind. In Africa and South America, Christians are prospering mightily, but the zeal to persecute heretics which periodically characterized Christian Churches from the late middle ages into the early modern period has largely faded away. And this is why the problem arises. Why should significant numbers of Westerners, especially among the educated, increasingly exhibit a quite visceral hatred of this apparently declining set of beliefs?

I first noticed this sentiment in the case of the brothers Hitchens, celebrated journalists, one on each side of the Atlantic. Christopher

is a "left-wing maverick" and recently visited his native Britain. He and his brother Peter, a patriotic Conservative in London, aren't very close. Why not, asked an interviewer in *The Times*. Is it because you are so far apart politically? Not at all, replied Christopher. What I can't stand is that Peter is a practicing Christian. Hitchens takes the view of the English publisher who once defined a religious fanatic as anyone who believed in God. But that was a joke, and Christopher isn't joking. Again, in November last year in Britain, an award for Christian athletes was dropped because of a reluctance among the athletes to be "outed" as Christians. The work of people like Richard Dawkins in Oxford breathes the passions of the long gone Rationalist Press Association for whose readers Christianity was a repressive power against which every form of free expression from science to free love was struggling to breathe. Meanwhile, Philip Pullman, whose best-selling trilogy for children promises to become, as it were, the new Narnia, is an atheist who has revived an old Gnostic doctrine to the effect that the temptation in the Garden of Eden was that of enlightenment rather than an invitation to evil disobedience. In another part of the forest, one might remember that some years ago in Lebanon a set of Christians began distributing pamphlets apologizing for the Crusades to the understandably bemused inhabitants of Beirut.

If we move from these straws in the wind to the wind itself, we might cite the results of recent polling in the United States by the American National Election Study which attempts to measure intergroup attitudes by "feeling thermometers" quantifying how one group regards another. Mutual hostility between religious groups such as Jews, Catholics, and Evangelicals appears in these results to have diminished, while secularists, who belong in the typology of "culture wars" as progressives rather than as orthodox in the moral and religious spectrum, have become increasingly hostile to the "religious right." Since the 1972 Democratic Convention, they have increasingly dominated the Democratic Party.

Why should intellectuals waste their shot and shell pounding a target which has largely faded from view (and indeed where the moral and logical issues are confused)? And what might this tell us about the internal cohesion of European or Western civilization? A more directly political question would take off from the contrast between the extraordinary solicitude for Islamic sensibilities in Western states since 9/11 and the insouciant clobbering of Christian totems by artists and writers. But before I suggest an explanation of this phenomenon, I need to explore its wider significance.

In the Middle Ages, Christianity was, like Judaism and Islam, a law to which its followers were subject: in other words, an identity. With the coming of the modern world, Christianity became, or perhaps was maneuvered into becoming, a set of beliefs purporting to answer the same questions as those asked by scientists, a role in which it was notably incompetent, and from which it has steadily withdrawn. Also, from the sixteenth century, the encompassing Church of the medieval *respublica Christiania* succumbed to the public-relations disaster of breaking up into a number of quarrelling versions. By the time of Voltaire in the eighteenth century, Christian churches had adopted a set of attitudes that has kept them on the defensive ever since. For one thing, Christianity was associated with orthodoxy and authority as against reason. For another, its language belonged to a posture of consolation and supplication at odds with the apparently realistic attitudes of the sceptic and the atheist who no longer hoped for an afterlife. *Épater les chrétiens* was no less amusing a sport than *épater les bourgeois*—indeed the two were often indistinguishable. The essence of the conflict between "science" and "religion" came to rest on the killer question: "Do you believe in God?" meaning by "God" a ubiquitous patriarch with the power to punish and reward. Nietzsche's crisp declaration that God is dead was widely accepted, though fewer people accepted the corollary that (as Dostoyevsky put it) everything is permitted.

It is important to observe that most of these battles were between science and “religion” rather than science and Christianity. Marx wrote that religion was the opium of the people, not Christianity specifically. The issue in those days was about the grounds of belief, of faith versus reason, and in principle all religious propositions were equally likely to be regarded as superstitious, as potential grounds of non-negotiable bigotry, or perhaps as “nonsense” in the technical sense affirmed by logical positivists. This was, significantly, the position of the Bolshevik regime, in which atheism was the basic religious doctrine taught in schools. Today, however, a significant change has occurred in progressive opinion: in a multicultural context, religious beliefs are taken to be part of “culture” and hence off limits to criticism, unless they are Christian, and more recently also, Jewish.

We may call this sentiment “Christophobia,” and its simplest version is the legend people got from Voltaire and others, namely, that mankind had hitherto been dominated by all kinds of strange prejudices and superstitions but that now at last (in the eighteenth century) a dawn of reason was rising in which human beings would abandon these divisive absurdities and recognize themselves as sharing a human essence with a right to happiness and the power actually to bring this about. Such was the core of belief found in Jacobinism, socialism, rationalisms of various kinds (including that of the American founders), logical positivism, and all other versions of what the nineteenth century espoused as progress and the twentieth century came to call “the Enlightenment Project.” And it is very important to observe that all other civilizations and peoples were to be incorporated within this projected earthly salvation. It was a global project.

Voltaire’s legend is, of course, simple-minded because it can give no account of why this dawn of reason should turn up in Europe, or indeed why it should turn up at all. The reason is that it is a political

program unwilling to recognize its debt to a past which it is busily repudiating. It is averse to recognizing Christianity as a historical phenomenon rather than as a mere mistake. Let me merely point to one or two obvious ways in which the modern world has emerged out of Christianity, not by repudiation but by a continuous evolution.

Consider the crucial issue of the nature of human beings. The Greeks believed that man was a rational animal, which implied that being human was a function of being rational. Women and slaves being defective in rationality were also less human. Christianity replaced this with the idea that each person was an immortal soul equally valuable to God and constituted of a set of affections, which had been deranged by the Fall. It thus counterposed against the hierarchical structures of society a theological egalitarianism which periodically erupted in trouble for holders of high office, bishops in particular. In the course of developing this complex idea of what it is to be a human being, Christian thinkers evolved the organ called “conscience” which could be incorporated within the new forms of urban life to generate the mode of moral experience we call “individualism.” Without this long development, the idea of human rights would be meaningless, as it largely is in other civilizations. The abolition of slavery was a major step in the advance of the progressive project, and it was, of course, almost entirely a Christian achievement.

The essential point may well be that Christianity as a religion was constituted by faith in Jesus as the redeemer. Faith is different from knowledge, and hence Christianity was hardly born before the philosophers were on board working hard to preserve some coherence in a doctrine that was never secure because of the human propensity to get things wrong (or indeed perhaps to get them inconveniently right). One of the earliest of the distinctions necessary to make sense of the world in terms of Christianity was, indeed, that between the secular and

the sacred on which secularism itself depends. Another given in the gospels is the distinction between the civil and the sacred powers, between church and state. These are indispensable constituents of the pluralism at the heart of Western civilization. The relation between theology and science is much too complicated to be dealt with here, but one might point out that the emergence of experimental science (which allowed the modern world so greatly to surpass the Greeks) depended upon the proposition that man could only understand what man had made himself. Since nature had been made by God, our only way of learning about it was not by speculation but by "putting it to the torture" as Bacon put it.

These considerations are perhaps enough for our limited purpose: namely, to make it clear that the question "Do you believe in God?" is a very bad indicator of where anyone might conceivably stand on the relation between our Christian inheritance on the one hand and our modern sophistication on the other. They are also sufficient, I think, to indicate that the common identification of Christianity as a repressive force by invoking the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the trial of Galileo is merely a tedious misunderstanding of history. What human institution, one may ask, doesn't have its ups and downs? But before moving on to make sense of the curious Christophobia of the modern West, I need to indicate why this is, in civilizational terms, so strange a phenomenon.

The minimal account of religion as a human phenomenon must be that it is a set of stories and beliefs human beings tell themselves to account for what lies behind the manageable world (to the extent that it is manageable) in which we live. In other words, a religion is a response to the mystery of the human condition. The going secularist account of human life is that we are part of an evolving organic life that happened to develop on the edge of a minor planet in a universe of unimaginable vastness. Beyond this, questions of meaning and significance are in scientific terms un-

answerable, and we tend to follow Wittgenstein: Whereof we cannot speak, thereof we must be silent. We have blocked off religious questions altogether, because they are empirically unanswerable, and people respond in a variety of ways. Some drop the questions and get on with life, others shop for a more exotic set of stories and rituals with which to respond, and many, of course, remain Christian to one degree or another. On the face of it, however, we have a culture which very largely carries on without seriously considering ultimates. We have abandoned the cathedral, and are content to scurry in and out of skyscrapers. So perhaps we are pioneering a new civilizational form in which the issues of human meaning have been recognized as essentially unsolvable, and left to one side. Or, alternatively, we may have transferred the passions appropriate to religion onto beliefs of some other kind.

Philosophers turn everything into preliminaries, and before I get to the main argument, I should perhaps declare my own position here. I am a simple child of secular times, and a sceptic, but one impressed by the grandeur and complexity of Christian intellectuality. The Voltairian and the village atheist, seen from this perspective, look a little shallow. In the vast rambling mansion of our civilization, the cobwebbed gothic wing containing our religious imagination is less frequented than previously, but it certainly remains a haunting presence.

And, of course, we have bought into substitutes. In secular terms, their basic feature must be that they look more like science than religion. Let me suggest that educated Europeans are today united in terms of a project we characterize as the perfecting of the human condition by the power of reason. Devotion to this perfection leads us to scan the news each day in search of signs of the times: we focus on the fate of rights and how they are violated round the world, at the poverty which signals the imperfection of inequality, at peace processes leading us forward and violence and bigotry drag-

ging us backward. The aim is to foster the happiness of mankind, and we are buoyed up when the signs are good and cast down when they are bad. We seek, if we respond to this new form of devotion, to harness human power to control human folly, inspired by our past successes in triumphing over the vagaries of nature. There are many internal disagreements over what this perfection might mean, though currently there is a large measure of agreement that the central problem is war and other forms of human conflict. All of this can be subsumed under the famous slogan that mankind must take its destiny into its own hands.

We can, I think, distinguish three stages, or more exactly variants, in the development of this project. The first is the entirely familiar idea of progress. Nineteenth-century Europeans in contact with technologically incapable people not only brought them the benefits of Christian salvation but also clean water, railways, and industry. The whole package was understood as a god-like increase in human power controlling human circumstance. This was profoundly disruptive in other cultures because they had long been accustomed to a different idea of the balance between what could be changed and what must be endured. Here from the West came a set of aliens teaching that nasty things that had long seemed inevitable could be remedied. But the actual situation of these interesting aliens was that they were missionaries not only to other cultures, but also to the mass of people in their own culture as well. Technologists, administrators, and intellectuals had to become, as Ernest Gellner has called them, "the Westernizers of the West." The great figures of the movement to improve the lives of the heathen often happened to be Christian missionaries like Schweitzer and Mother Teresa, but in Europe itself, and in America and other Western parts, they were rulers and social reformers.

Christians might be believers in progress, but progressives were likely to find Christianity an optional extra, if not an actual

impediment to the advance of reason. Christians were therefore often suspicious of progress. "To become a popular religion," wrote W. R. Inge, "it is only necessary for a superstition to enslave a philosophy. The Superstition of Progress had the singular good fortune to enslave at least three philosophies—those of Hegel, of Comte, and of Darwin." Beyond European civilization the demand was indeed for philosophies of one kind or another, not for religions, which many of them already had in abundance. Gunpowder, clean water, and vaccines were the thing, not routes to salvation. For most of the beneficiaries of Western enlightenment abroad, Christianity was for understandable reasons increasingly understood as an optional extra. The crucial thing was that scientists seemed to have a method of coming to agreement about what was true and what worked, whereas Christians and exponents of other religions seemed locked into endless irresolvable disputes. Hence the initial response of Indians, Chinese, and others was likely to be admiration for the technical skills of Europeans, and contempt for their beliefs and manners.

The smart thing to do seemed to be to copy Western technology and throw the rest away. Like most versions of smart cherry picking, this one turned out not to work. The baffling thing was that in often mysterious ways, the generation of railways, medical surgery, military science, and so on seemed to be inseparable from Western institutions and ideas. Foreigners are always detestable, and superior foreigners even more so. The horrible possibility loomed that in order to cut themselves in on this Western power, non-Europeans might have actually to become Europeans themselves. Even outsiders as culturally close to Europe as the Russians developed strong countercurrents to Western influence, as with the Slavophiles. The same was true in Eastern Europe. Even Germany before the First World War conceived of itself as a spiritually superior nation quite different from the shallow technology of the French and the British.

Progress was a development that sought to bring reason and betterment both to the poor in Western countries, and to the downtrodden in the rest of the world. It was a movement of benevolence, but benevolence at this level of human relations is not easy to distinguish from power. The West, it seemed, was bent on taking over the world. The result would be to turn everyone into imitation Europeans, and foreign cultures rebelled. It made no difference that their rebellion against the benevolence of the West could only be articulated in ideas and institutions (nationalism, self-determination, parliaments, etc.) borrowed from the arrogant West itself. Outsiders used whatever instruments were to hand and demanded for themselves the political freedoms the West claimed to champion.

This repudiation of progress hardly stopped the project in its tracks. Western ingenuity was more than equal to the task of creating more assimilable forms of Westernization. The trick was to combine some version of Westernization, or perhaps we should say modernization, that was both a recipe for "joining the modern world" and also the expression of a powerful hostility to the West itself. Such a package would allow resentful Chinese and Indians to absorb the West while at the same time rejecting it. Reason and passion might thus both be accommodated. This was the achievement, though not indeed quite the intention, of Marx and other socialists for whom Westernizing the West was no less central a project than spreading enlightenment to the rest of the world.

What I am treating as the "stages" of the Enlightenment Project are not, indeed, successive. There is a good deal of overlap. The Marxist version of progress was communism, and the term may stand for all forms of collectivism which took off from the view that bourgeois individualism had merely been one phase in the emergence of modernity, and one that was imminently to be superseded by higher communal forms of association. In its beginnings, commun-

ism counted itself as the real inheritor of progress. Whereas the enlightened looked to reason, communists looked to revolution as the way of blasting a path through reaction to the promised land of technology and equality, or soviets plus electricity. The Marxist version of human perfectionism had an irresistible appeal during most of the twentieth century, partly because it offered the promise not only of catching up with the West, but also of skipping a stage and jumping to the head of the progressive convoy.

The great drama of twentieth-century history was the failure of this promise. Far from solving human conflict, the revolution of humanitarian fraternity served merely to increase it. Far from forging ahead into the modern world, the countries that followed this path lost much of their moral or social capital and ended up with an obsolete rusting industry built over a pile of corpses. It became clear that perfecting the human condition was a bit more complicated than it had seemed.

The failure of Communism was consecrated in the fall of the Soviet Union. The remarkable thing is that, as in most cases when prophecy fails, the faith never faltered. Indeed, an alternative version had long been maturing, though cast into the shadows for a time by enthusiasm for the quick fix of revolution. It had, however, been maturing for at least a century and already had a notable repertoire of institutions available. We may call it Olympianism, because it is the project of an intellectual elite that believes that it enjoys superior enlightenment and that its business is to spread this benefit to those living on the lower slopes of human achievement. And just as Communism had been a political project passing itself off as the ultimate in scientific understanding, so Olympianism burrowed like a parasite into the most powerful institution of the emerging knowledge economy—the universities.

We may define Olympianism as a vision of human betterment to be achieved on a global scale by forging the peoples of the

world into a single community based on the universal enjoyment of appropriate human rights. Olympianism is the cast of mind dedicated to this end, which is believed to correspond to the triumph of reason and community over superstition and hatred. It is a politico-moral package in which the modern distinction between morals and politics disappears into the aspiration for a shared mode of life in which the communal transcends individual life. To be a moral agent is in these terms to affirm a faith in a multicultural humanity whose social and economic conditions will be free from the causes of current misery. Olympianism is thus a complex long-term vision, and contemporary Western Olympians partake of different fragments of it.

To be an Olympian is to be entangled in a complex dialectic involving elitism and egalitarianism. The foundational elitism of the Olympian lies in self-ascribed rationality, generally picked up on an academic campus. Egalitarianism involves a formal adherence to democracy as a rejection of all forms of traditional authority, but with no commitment to taking any serious notice of what the people actually think. Olympians instruct mortals, they do not obey them. Ideally, Olympianism spreads by rational persuasion, as prejudice gives way to enlightenment. Equally ideally, democracy is the only tolerable mode of social coordination, but until the majority of people have become enlightened, it must be constrained within a framework of rights, to which Olympian legislation is constantly adding. Without these constraints, progress would be in danger from reactionary populism appealing to prejudice. The overriding passion of the Olympian is thus to educate the ignorant and everything is treated in educational terms. Laws for example are enacted not only to shape the conduct of the people, but also to send messages to them. A belief in the power of role models, public relations campaigns, and above all fierce restrictions on raising sensitive questions *devant le peuple* are all part of pedagogic Olympianism.

Olympianism is the characteristic belief system of today's secularist, and it has itself many of the features of a religion. For one thing, the fusion of political conviction and moral superiority into a single package resembles the way in which religions (outside liberal states) constitute comprehensive ways of life supplying all that is necessary (in the eyes of believers) for salvation. Again, the religions with which we are familiar are monotheistic and refer everything to a single center. In traditional religions, this is usually God; with Olympianism, it is society, understood ultimately as including the whole of humanity. And Olympianism, like many religions, is keen to proselytize. Its characteristic mode of missionary activity is journalism and the media.

If Olympianism has the character of a religion, as I am suggesting, there would be no mystery about its hostility to Christianity. Real religions (by contrast with test-tube religions such as ecumenism) don't much like each other; they are, after all, competitors. Olympianism, however, is in the interesting position of being a kind of religion which does not recognize itself as such, and indeed claims a cognitive superiority to religion in general. But there is a deeper reason why the spread of Olympianism may be measured by the degree of Christophobia. It is that Olympianism is an imperial project which can only be hindered by the association between Christianity and the West.

Consider another rather more obviously imperial project. It appears to be the case that Colonel Gaddafi of Libya wants to fuse Libya with the whole of Africa. This would seem to be an absurd enterprise, given that Libya is small and Africa vast. The Colonel seeks, however, to “melt and merge [Libya] in Africa.” The cost of this adventure is in one way catastrophic: Libya would cease to exist. But on the other hand, Libya would in a sense become Africa. It would have the run of all that water, those raw materials, that exploding population, etc. This is the

image of a grandiose project of takeover, and it might stand, I suggest, as an image of the Olympian project of turning the whole world into an expression of Western prosperity and human rights. The cost might well be abandoning the particular character of Western civilization as an historic entity, but Olympianism might also be the salvation of mankind.

In reality, of course, you can't give up your identity, because you are what you are. It's a fantasy. You can, however, toss away the scraps of your past that seem to be an impediment to your present ambitions, as some Olympians have done in apologizing for the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Conquest of the Americas, slavery, and anything else apologizing for which might curry favor with one part of the "Third World" or another. Above all, however, Olympianism seeks to repudiate its own religious basis. The last thing a missionary rationalism needs is a noisy minority reminding outsiders that the project of world justice as currently advanced is a spin-off from Western civilization. Worse, Christianity as a reminder of this fact is exactly the thing likely to provoke irrational resistance to the message. The basis of much of the visceral hatred of Christianity today is that it contradicts the ambition to present the West as the source of pure reason and compassion. Very similar Olympian passions may well account for the rising hatred of Israel, construed as a vehicle of religious dogmatism standing in the way of the West's accommodation with the whole Islamic world.

The Olympian project now takes the form of advancing world government by judicializing political conflicts, and its central instrument is in expanding treaty commitment to human rights and in creating international criminal law. The setback (for Olympians) of Colonel Gaddafi's Libya becoming the Chair of the U.N. Committee on Human Rights suggests that there is a certain unreality in these international organizations, but Olympians think in the long term. They have, after all, been working on the project since Woodrow Wilson

and the League of Nations. Failure in the 1930s was redeemed after 1945 by the creation of the United Nations, which accorded international bureaucracies some power over most of the important political problems. Politicians can often be persuaded to sign uplifting treaties even at the cost of creating problems for their own constitutions. An imagined place in history is a powerful inducement to a politician. The treaties signed soon come to be understood by lawyers and journalists, always keen to expand their power, as another step forward in the process of making a better world.

They are even spoken of as if they constituted international law. Certainly Olympian high-mindedness is a powerful enough card in public opinion to make any denunciation of these instruments by democratic governments a perilous adventure. The concept of "the world community" flattered the West, which was therefore prepared to foot the bills. It is however an empty expression since the world community neither covers the world nor constitutes a community. The Iraq crisis of 2002–2003 made it very clear that the executive element of the "world community" (if there is any) is to be found in the United States. The General Assembly of the U.N. is not to be taken very seriously as a legislature.

Progress, Communism, and Olympianism: these are three versions of the grand Western project. The first rumbles along in the background of our thought, the second is obviously a complete failure, but Olympianism is not only alive but a positively vibrant force in the way we think now. Above all, it determines the Western moral posture towards the rest of the world. It affirms democracy as an ideal, but carefully manipulates attitudes in a nervous attempt to control opinions hostile to Olympianism, such as beliefs in capital or corporal punishment, racial, and other forms of prejudice, national self-assertion—and indeed, religion.

The essence of the Olympian moral posture is a kind of humility. Whatever it has, it is keen to share—technology especially. A

just world is an offer to be accepted, not a command to be obeyed. The project being to bring everyone into the world community, Olympians will make whatever sacrifices are required. It will not only pick up the expenses, but abandon anything in its own past that might be a sticking point to non-Western peoples. Humility amounts to the offer of accommodation to others on terms that all sides can agree upon, and the great virtue of the humble is that they can recognize, own up to and apologize for their faults.

Such a moral posture comes naturally to the Olympian because it merely extends to the Third World the precedence accorded to the poor when deciding public policy in the liberal democratic states of the West itself. The old familiar social question—how to deal with the poor—has suddenly turned up in a civilizational context. "The test of a civilization," Olympians somewhat implausibly say to each other, "is how it treats its poor and vulnerable." The rhetoric of Western elites is steeped in self-criticism about the inequalities of contemporary Western societies. Ideally, the Western elites would like to see, or at least imagine they would like to see, an order of things which dispenses, or at least seems to dispense, with inequality, indeed with any form of the exercise of power. The aim of the Olympian project in this area is to replace as the basis of order irrational passions such as fear of punishment. They ought to give way to more rational expedients such as understanding and therapy. As in all versions of the Enlightenment, "education" is central, but one needs distancing quotes around the term "education" to make it clear that we are referring to a process that aims to produce people of a certain type: in other words, not education at all, but training. And the basis of this training will be to make people empirically flexible but morally rigid.

Having developed a welfarist moral and political posture, the Olympian takes easily to expressing the same posture in international affairs. That notably coercive institu-

tion the state is now pronounced a survival from the past. The idea of governing has not quite disappeared from politics, but the term "governance" is preferred, not only because it sounds more arcane, but also because it suggests that laws and rules "emerge" out of a society rather than be made by some sovereign body. Rules, laws, edicts, recommendations, and so on turn up in our lives without apparently being touched by human breath; they come from bodies so remote—preferably supranational if not international—that one may take their wisdom for granted. And if there should be muttering about the burdens this concern for the world's poor might impose, Olympians have taught their democratic populations to think of themselves as generous and compassionate to suffering classes of people. They have large funds available for subsidizing the Third World poor in their endeavors to improve themselves. In any case, Western people are extraordinarily generous about helping those who suffer in remote places.

One of the central problems of Olympianism has always been with the nation state and its derivative, nationalism. A world of nation states is one of constant potential antipathy. It makes something of a mockery of the term "world community." Hence it is a basic tenet of Olympianism that the day of the nation state has gone. It is an anachronism. And on this point, events have played into the hands of this project. The homogeneity of these nation states is a condition of democracy, but it also facilitates the wars in which they have engaged. If, however, homogeneity were to be lost as states became multicultural, then they would turn into empires, and their freedom of action would be seriously constrained. Empires can only be ruled, to the extent that they are ruled, from the top. They are ideal soil for oligarchy. Olympianism is very enthusiastic about this new development, which generates multiculturalism. Those who rule a rainbow society will have little trouble with an unruly na-

tional will, because no such thing remains possible. The Olympian lawyer and administrator will adjudicate the interests of a heterogeneous population according to some higher set of principles. Indeed, quite a lot of this work can be contracted out to independent agencies of the state, agencies whose judgments lead on to judicial tribunals in cases of conflict. This is part of a process in which the autonomy of civil institutions (of firms to employ whom they want, of schools to teach curricula they choose, and so on) is steadily eroded by centralized standards. Multiculturalism in the name of abstract moral standards has the effect of restricting freedom across the board.

Like the Libyans in Africa, the Olympians in the West are turning a plural thing like a civilization into a rigid thing like a project. There is a dire purposiveness about the Olympian passion for signing up to treaties and handing power over to international bureaucrats who want to rule the world. Everything down to the details of family life and the modes of education are governed

and guided so as to fit into the rising project of a world government. The independence of universities in choosing whom to admit, of firms choosing whom to employ, of citizens to say and think what they like has all been subject to regulation in the name of harmony between nations and peace between religions. The playfulness and creativity of Western societies is under threat. So too is their identity and freedom.

Globalization is having very odd effects on our thinking, but none is more curious than the Olympian project of turning the West's cultural plurality into a homogenized rationalism designed for export to, and domination over, the rest of the world. Turning a civilization into a project by putting everything through a kind of rationalist strainer so as to remove every item that might count as prejudice, bigotry, and superstition will leave Europeans meandering without a compass in a wonderland of abstractions. It reminds one of Aesop's frog, who wanted to be as big as an ox, and blew himself up more and more, his skin becoming thinner and thinner, till he burst.

Malcolm Muggeridge's journey

by Roger Kimball

I came to Carthage, where I found myself in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lusts. I had not yet fallen in love, but I was in love with the idea of it, and this feeling that something was missing made me despise myself for not being more anxious to satisfy the need. I began to look around for some object for my love, since I badly wanted to love something.

—St. Augustine, *Confessions*

Diversion is the only thing that consoles us in our wretchedness, and yet diversion is itself the greatest of our miseries. For it is diversion above all that keeps us from seriously taking stock of ourselves and so leads us imperceptibly to perdition.

—Pascal, *Pensées*

There are people for whom evil means only a mal-adjustment with things, a wrong correspondence of one's life with the environment. Such evil as this is curable, at least in principle, upon the natural plane. . . . But there are others for whom evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy.

—W. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*

March 2003 marked the centennial of the British writer, television personality, and moral and religious gadfly Thomas Malcolm Muggeridge. The “Thomas,” which

Muggeridge never used, was after Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle's fulminations against modernity, the “cash nexus,” materialism, etc., greatly impressed Muggeridge *père*, a factory clerk and earnest Fabian reformer in Croydon, south of London. H. T. Muggeridge was the overwhelming influence on Malcolm's early life, and so it was only natural that Carlyle's animadversions should greatly impress him, too. The third of five boys, Malcolm once claimed that Carlyle was the greatest influence on his literary style. I doubt that. But Muggeridge did become an accomplished fulminator, sometimes of conspicuous, even Carlylean, gloominess. If he never produced anything to equal Carlyle's great historical works, he did rival the sage of Chelsea in the ferocity of his denunciations—also his enthusiasms—and may have outdone Carlyle in the deployment of gleefully deflationary wit. He certainly wrote more digestible prose.

Muggeridge is not much of a presence today, though his anniversary is sparking a minor recrudescence of Muggeridgiana. A painstaking and informative biography by Gregory Wolfe, originally published in 1995, will be re-issued with a brief new preface later this year.¹ (Richard Ingrams's shorter, more sprightly life, also published in 1995, is unfortunately out of print.) Sprouting here

¹ *Malcolm Muggeridge: A Biography*, by Gregory Wolfe; Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 490 pages, \$15 (paper).

and there are panels, symposia, and conferences devoted to “St. Mugg”—as the cartoonist Wally Fawkes (“Trog”) once denominated him—as well as sundry essays with titles like “Malcolm Muggeridge’s Journey.”

I suspect it will prove to be a brief and haphazard revival, however, and more’s the pity. Muggeridge is a tonic force, well worth resuscitating. He could be crankish. Sometimes he was downright absurd. But, at least until the last decade of his life, when his powers guttered, he was rarely *merely* crankish. Often he was incandescently perceptive. Above all he provided an intelligent admonitory voice, a voice against the grain of received opinion, urging caution, broadcasting unwelcome truths, nudging his interlocutors beyond the warm circle of their self-absorption.

In his heyday, which stretched from the 1930s through the 1960s and into the 1970s, Muggeridge was a formidable figure. He commanded prodigious literary and rhetorical gifts. He knew everyone: the infamous as well as the famous. He traveled everywhere: teaching in India and Egypt as a young man, on assignment in Moscow, Washington, New York, Berlin, Tokyo . . . In World War II, Muggeridge was a spy with MI6, stationed in Mozambique. He was, according to one biographer, an “outstanding secret agent,” through whose ministrations a German U-boat was captured. Muggeridge was also a nimble public performer, quick with a comeback, heedless of sacred cows. His enemies (never in short supply) belabored his inconsistencies, his “contradictions”; he gloried in them.

Over the course of his long career (he died in 1990 at eighty-seven), Muggeridge published a clutch of novels. In 1931, his play, *Three Flats*, was performed in London. (George Bernard Shaw, who had already read the work, was in the audience opening night.) “From earliest childhood,” Muggeridge noted, “it always seemed to me that the only thing worth doing in life was to write.”

But Muggeridge was not really Mugger-

idge in his purely literary efforts. His best work was in the realm of journalism, taking that term in its highest and broadest sense. He wrote about virtually every signal public event and personality from around 1930 through the 1970s. And yet he invariably interwove description with introspection. Reporting the news was part of assembling his autobiography. By the same token, his autobiographical writings—published are a volume of diaries and *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, a two-volume memoir that takes Muggeridge through World War II—are instinct with the news and personalities of the day.

Muggeridge seems to have written for just about every important English paper and journal, including *The Spectator*, *Encounter*, *The Listener*, *The New Statesman*, *The Manchester Guardian* (where he became chief leader writer at twenty-seven), *The Telegraph* (where he was deputy editor for a spell), and *Punch*, which he edited for nearly five years in the 1950s. Muggeridge also wrote for many American publications. He had a column at *Esquire*—a publication that once mattered—and his work would regularly turn up in *The New Republic*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and other illustrious venues. By late 1940s he was a familiar figure on BBC radio. By the late-1950s he was ubiquitous on BBC television, where his cantankerous wit, oddly patrician appearance (replete with cigarette-and-holder for histrionic effect), and braying, Cambridge-trumps-Croydon accent transfixed audiences. A patent of his celebrity came in 1968 when his wax figure was unveiled at Madame Tussaud’s, sharing a room with Elizabeth Taylor, Charles de Gaulle, Alfred Hitchcock, and the Beatles, among others.

In his prose, Muggeridge tended to proceed by imbrication, layering his analysis of appearance, character, and achievement—the whole set firmly in the context of world events—to produce memorable, often devastating, portraits. In 1956, after the Suez crisis, Muggeridge had this to say about Prime Minister Anthony Eden:

His somehow slightly seedy good looks and attire, his ingratiating smile and gestures, the utter nothingness of what he had to say—did it not all provide an outward and visible manifestation of an inward and invisible loss of authority and self-confidence? Yes, it was entirely fitting that this tedious, serious Etonian, on whose lips were the last dying echoes of the late nineteenth-century concept of progress without tears, should have had his moment in the middle of the turbulent and cruel twentieth century. He was a Disraeli hero who had moved into a service flat. . . . As has been truly said, . . . he was not only a bore, he bored for England.

Has Eden's essential fecklessness ever been more piquantly sketched? Can anyone who has heard of the man who not only "bored, but bored for England" forget the characterization?

Deflationary finales were one of Muggeridge's specialties. After World War II, he went to Tokyo and witnessed a public appearance by the Emperor: a "nervous, shy, stuttering, pathetic figure, formerly god."

There was a large streak of the contrarian in Muggeridge. If all good society were united in believing "X," he was likely to give "not-X" a sympathetic airing. It was part of his lifelong campaign against highminded earnestness—which is not, I hasten to add, the same thing as a campaign against seriousness. Sometimes, it is true, Muggeridge was merely impish. It was part of what made him an effective television performer. An interview with Salvador Dalí began with this exchange:

MUGGERIDGE: I know we're supposed to discuss modern art, and I expect we shall, but first of all may I say I'm fascinated by your moustaches. Might I ask what happens to them at night?

DALÍ: They droop.

When the evangelist Billy Graham replied to a question by saying that "Only God could answer that one," Muggeridge in-

stantly interjected: "And we haven't got him in the studio, or"—casting his eyes upwards—"have we?"

Muggeridge was a complex, many-sided creature. He was a driven man, plagued by insomnia, night fears, and nameless yearnings for surcease. His joking, bad-boy antics were played partly for laughs, for "ratings." But they also, I believe, had a more serious purpose. In the mid-1950s, when the scandal about Princess Margaret and Group Captain Townsend was fresh, he wrote a couple of exasperated pieces about the royal family. The title of the first, "Royal Soap Opera," epitomizes his point.

Muggeridge's criticism seems anodyne by today's standards. But it caused a furor at the time. The BBC banished him (temporarily) from its airwaves. *The Sunday Express* thundered that Muggeridge had "earned the contempt of all Britain." A stranger spat at him in Brighton; his cottage at Robertsbridge was defaced with slogans by empire loyalists; a neighbor told him he was no longer welcome to walk across his fields: the wages of candor. In the United States, Muggeridge was interviewed by Mike Wallace. He dispensed his usual quota of pleasantries. Wallace quoted the British MP Michael Astor's remark that Muggeridge's "genius is for disliking [his] fellow human beings."

Well, if my fellow human beings were all Astors, there might be some element of truth in that, but fortunately for us all, the Astor family is a large one, but not so large that it's occupied the whole human race.

That sort of thing keeps people entertained. But Muggeridge also went on to make this serious point.

The essence of a free and civilized society is that everything should be subject to criticism, that all forms of authority should be treated with a certain reservation, and . . . that once you have produced . . . a totally conformist society in which there were no critics, that would in fact be an exact equivalent of the

totalitarian societies against which which we are supposed to be fighting a cold war.

It is worth noting that in suggesting that “all forms of authority should be treated with a certain reservation,” Muggeridge is not denying the legitimacy of authority—what we might call the authority of authority. On the contrary, he hoped that constructive criticism would help bolster the claims of authority. He knew too well what happened when authority collapsed. It is one of the main themes of *The Thirties* (1940), perhaps his most comprehensive piece of social observation. Reviewing the book, George Orwell described this tart moral and political portrait of the decade as “brilliant and depressing.” Like many readers, Orwell thought the book too negative—a sobering judgment from the author of *1984*—but he subscribed to its main lesson, that “We are living a nightmare precisely *because* we have tried to set up an earthly paradise.”

Muggeridge was weaned on well-scrubbed attempts to set up an earthly paradise. It was a main plank of the Fabian creed: to dispense with the burdensome scaffolding of the past, its selfish institutions, its superstitions, its allegiance to outmoded vices like competition and greed. Love, harmony, brotherhood—an end to the depredations of inherited wealth, inherited . . . anything. Onwards, upwards, unfettered progress forever and ever. Not only was Muggeridge raised in that creed, he also married into it. Kitty Dobbs was the beautiful, freethinking niece of Sidney and Beatrice Webb; in marrying her, he noted many years later, he was marrying into “a sort of aristocracy of the Left.”

Muggeridge’s great gift as a political commentator was a nose for spurious idealism. Like nearly every right-thinking (which meant left-leaning) person, the young Muggeridge regarded the Soviet Union as the first chapter of the new utopia. When he went there as Moscow correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian* in the

early 1930s, disabusement was almost immediate. As a leader writer, Muggeridge had tapped out “Many an uplifting sentence . . . expressing the hope that moderate men of all shades of opinion would draw together, and that wiser counsels might yet prevail.” In Moscow, he discovered that “moderate men of all shades of opinion had a way of disappearing into Lubinka Prison, never to be seen again.” Muggeridge saw the future, and—unlike Lincoln Steffens a decade earlier—he saw that it was hell on earth. Russia, he understood, was in the process of becoming “a huge and centrally organised slave state.” It wasn’t long before he was writing to his aunt-by-marriage Beatrice about his

overwhelming conviction that the [Soviet] Government and all it stands for, its crude philosophy (religion if you like) is evil and a denial of everything I care for in life. . . .

Why should uncle Sidney say . . . “I indignantly repudiate the slander that there is forced labour in the Soviet Union” when every single person in Russia knows there is forced labour . . . ?

A glimpse of Stalin’s Russia spurred Muggeridge’s political awakening. It is to his everlasting credit that he had the wit to see through his Fabian “ideals” and the courage to broadcast the horrors going on around him. In the beginning, at least, he was almost alone. Western intellectuals flocked to the workers’ paradise that Stalin had created and “they were one and all utterly delighted and excited by what they saw there.”

Clergymen walked serenely and happily through the anti-god museums, politicians claimed that no system of society could possibly be more equitable and just, lawyers admired Soviet justice, and economists praised the Soviet economy.

As for the Webbs and their starry-eyed ideal of universal brotherhood, Muggeridge summed it up in a dismissive BBC broadcast after their deaths. Comparing Beatrice to

Don Quixote, he wrote that “she finished up enmeshed in her own self-deception, adulating a regime [the USSR] which bore as little relation to the Fabian Good Life as Dulcinea del Toboso to the Mistress of Don Quixote’s dreams.”²

Muggeridge was one of the first—perhaps he was *the* first—Western journalist to expose the awful brutality of Soviet totalitarianism. He was equally prescient about Hitler, early on warning against the British policy of appeasement. In addition, Muggeridge had the rare perspicacity to understand that left-wing tyranny is no less murderous than the right-wing variety. Reporting from Berlin in 1933, he wrote that “It’s silly to say that the Brown terror is worse than the Red Terror. They’re both horrible.”

It is one thing—an important thing—to proclaim the bestiality of Communism or Nazism. It is quite another to discern the ways in which liberalism itself nurtures unfreedom. By the 1950s, Muggeridge had come to believe that liberalism is “*the* destructive force of the age.” In part, his criticism was reminiscent of Tocqueville’s. Unchecked, the impulse to equality became an impulse to homogeneity: the drive for democracy involved a democratic despotism that did not, as Tocqueville put it, so much tyrannize as infantilize. “The welfare state,” Muggeridge observed, “is a kind of zoo which provides its inmates with ease and comfort and unfits them for life in their natural habitat.”

But Muggeridge’s brief against liberalism went deeper. Liberalism, he thought, illustrated the paradox of good intentions, whereby the opposite of what was intended comes to pass. Consider education. Scratch a liberal, and he shouts “Education!” What-

ever social or political problem society confronts, good liberals huddle together and decide “What’s needed is more and better education.” (Obligatory codicil: “And the money—i.e., your money—to pay for it.”) Is crime a problem? Education is the answer. Poverty? Education is the answer. War, violence, sickness, unkindness, death? Education, education, education. If only, the liberal muses, everyone were awakened to his or her own true interests, all the world’s problems could be solved. But this notion, Muggeridge saw, is an illusion. Liberalism proposes what is unattainable:

that we little men and women should live in amity together on our minute corner of the universe for the few score years vouchsafed us, of our own volition seeking one another’s good and sharing equitably in the material things which satisfy our needs and desires. This is a fantasy. This, in human terms, cannot be. Therefore, the effect of believing in it is constantly tearing the world to pieces.

On the question of liberalism, as indeed on much else, Muggeridge’s thinking was close to that of Dostoevsky, one of his favorite authors. He understood that some men (and women) do nasty things not because they are ill-informed but because they are nasty. Evil is not something an especially plush government program is going to eliminate. Evil is irremediable. The liberal’s cheery vision of universal brotherhood is false because it is based on an abbreviated view of human nature. “If,” Muggeridge wrote, “you envisage men as being only men, you are bound to see human society . . . as a factory farm in which the only consideration that matters is the well-being of the livestock and the prosperity or productivity of the enterprise.” Liberalism is like utilitarianism in proposing to superintend happiness. But the happiness on offer is the blunt palliative of animal satisfaction: satiety, not joy.

In 1938, Muggeridge published *In a Valley of This Restless Mind*. It was commissioned to be a survey of contemporary religious ideas.

2 “I listened to the broadcast with growing horror, incredulity, and anger,” responded the chairman of the BBC. “The Webbs were personal friends of mine. . . . [N]obody can doubt that they were great public servants; after all they were buried in Westminster Abbey. . . .” *After all*, indeed. Some things never change.

What turned out was an odd but powerful sort of spiritual autobiography, a portrait of existential anguish and bewilderment that begins "Looking for God, I sat in Westminster Abbey and watched sightseers drift by." Pascal, another Muggeridge favorite, characterized the human condition as bounded by "*inconstance, ennui, inquiétude*"—fickleness, boredom, and restlessness. Restlessness was Muggeridge's constitutional affliction, boredom his overpowering fear. *Valley* is an sly acknowledgment of that fact, part ventriloquizing credo, part disaffected satire.

"What are you interested in?" asks the literary editor.

I said I was interested in Lust and in Money and in God.

"I've seen a book lying about that might be suitable. Short notice if worth it."

In a favorable review of the book, Evelyn Waugh noted that "what Mr. Muggeridge has discovered and wishes to explain is the ancient piece of folk-wisdom that Lust and Love are antithetical and that Lust is boring." Muggeridge's life is an illustration of the Pascalian insight that restlessness is a secret friend of boredom, feeding on what it abominates in order to sustain itself. Which is to say that what is boring may also be addictive.

Today, to the extent that he is known at all, Malcolm Muggeridge is more notorious than famous. He is remembered less for the truths he communicated than for the life that he led. He is the Libertine Who Found God, a latter-day St. Augustine who lingered in the flesh pots before turning to denounce them and embrace religion. Muggeridge lingered longer and more assiduously than most. He was an ambitious smoker, heavy drinker, and tireless adulterer. (His wife Kitty, it is worth noting, also pursued numerous adulterous liaisons; her last child, Charles, was fathered by one of her lovers.) According to Richard Ingrams, by the 1960s Muggeridge's behavior towards women

had become embarrassing and frequently outrageous. BBC colleagues called him "The Pouncer." Patricia, [his friend] Claud Cockburn's wife, compared him to a Russian peasant, describing an incident when during a dinner party she went upstairs to make a phone call and was pursued by Malcolm who began to assault her. Outraged, Patricia struck out at him with the telephone, knocked him down and flew into a panic, convinced that she had killed him.

By the mid-1960s, Muggeridge had said goodbye to all that, giving up smoking first, then booze, then womanizing. Plagued by digestive problems, he also became a vegetarian. In 1982 he entered the Roman Catholic Church. His enemies, and even his friends, were not edified. They saw in him the aging reprobate who, stymied by flagging appetite, rails against the sins of his youth and cravenly turns to religion. The fact that Muggeridge launched *Mother Teresa* as a celebrity in the late 1960s, devoting a television show and book to her life and work, seemed to underscore the divide between Muggeridge the worldly wit and Muggeridge the retiring ascetic.

What this familiar criticism overlooks is the extent to which Muggeridge had always been a deeply religious character, a "pilgrim." As an adolescent, he would secretly read the Bible—secretly, because he knew his father would not have approved. At Cambridge, he seriously contemplated a religious vocation. His diary is full of entries minuting his religious fears, cravings, and exaltations. Muggeridge understood that the merely human is at best the nearly human. At the same time, his revulsions are at odds with the amplexity of the faith he proclaimed. In an interview from the 1960s, Muggeridge said that he "saw life as an eternal battle between two irreconcilable opposites, the world of the flesh and the world of the spirit." Yet "God made the world and saw that it was good." It seems a pity that this robust soul should have mistaken affirmation for indulgence.

From “the Evil Empire” to “the Empire for Liberty”

by Paul Johnson

Is the United States imperialist? Has it created, or is it creating, an empire? If so, should we regard this process as desirable, even inevitable? These questions are raised by the American conquest of Iraq which, together with the prolegomenon of September 11, constitutes the first key event of the twenty-first century, foreshadowing a new world order.

First, it is important to understand what we mean by the word “empire.” Its core meaning is “rule,” with the implication “unqualified rule.” A country designated as an empire is one which possesses numerous territories but, more important, absolute sovereignty over itself. This usage came into English in the sixteenth century to designate the unlimited legal power of the Crown in parliament, and the impotence of papal writs. All the major Reformation statutes which repudiated Roman claims contained the word. Thus the statute 24 Henry VII of 1532–1533, Chapter 12, begins: “This realm of England is an empire.” The Crown in parliament could thus make and unmake bishops, revise doctrine and liturgy, and dispose at will of Church lands, then 20 percent of the total, without reference to Rome. This marked the point at which England withdrew from the medieval entity called Christendom in which kings and popes agreed to share sovereignty, after many disputes, not on an ideological but on an *ad hoc* basis, later formalized in treaties known as Concordats. Under the old

medieval system, indeed, popes claimed the right, *in extremis*, to depose wicked territorial disputes. The last major pre-Reformation exercise of this power came in 1493 when Pope Alexander VI published the Bull *Inter cetera*, dividing the New World between Spain and Portugal: the two powers accepted the arbitration the following year in the Treaty of Tordesillas, whereby Portugal was to have all land in the Western hemisphere east of the north-south line drawn 370 leagues from Cape Verde, Spain taking the rest. This proved one of the most important rulings in history, since it gave Portugal Brazil, which remains Portuguese-speaking to this day, and left the rest of the Americas to Spain.

However, the fact that England had declared itself an empire invalidated the papal award in official English eyes, a judgment made formal by Queen Elizabeth I’s chief minister, Sir William Cecil, who told the Spanish Ambassador that English settlers were free to claim for the Crown any territory in the Americas not yet settled. The term “the British Empire” came into use at about the same time. It was given a religious underpinning by the widespread belief in England, made explicit in Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*, the most popular book in Elizabethan and Jacobean England after the Bible, that for historical reasons the English had succeeded the discredited Jews as the Elect Nation, had vindicated their claim by the Reformation, and had a global mission

to carry thus-purified Christianity throughout the world. This was the confident belief of the earliest English settlers in Virginia, still more so of the Pilgrim Fathers, and it was epitomized in the statement of John Winthrop who encapsulated America's global mission: "We must consider that we shall be a city on a hill, the eyes of all people are on us."

Colonial America was thus a venture in imperialism under divine sanction. The settlers exercised from the start a degree of self-government incompatible with long-term submission to the mother country. But it is important to grasp that the issue of taxation was not the only one in the American Revolution of the 1770s. Still more important to Virginians like George Washington was the Crown's ban on further settlement west of the Appalachian watershed. The truth is, the Americans were more imperialist than the English. All the states south of New England saw their western frontiers as undefined, and their east-west lines of demarcation stretching across the entire continent to the Pacific. Once the United States came into being and the immensity of the land became apparent, the practicalities of administration dictated the creation of new states. But it is clear that the idea of Manifest Destiny—that is, the quasi-religious right of the English-speaking settlers to occupy the whole of the continent—existed in embryo a century before the phrase was coined. Indeed, it was a long time before all Americans admitted the right of Canada and Mexico to co-exist with their Union, seemingly sanctified by history, politics, economics, religion, and geography.

If Canada and Mexico escaped the net of destiny, the *imperium* of America consolidated itself by two stupendous bargains. The Louisiana Purchase whereby Bonaparte yielded to the United States an immense territory of 828,000 square miles for what, even then, seemed the derisory sum of \$15 million, or four cents an acre, was an imperial transfer without precedent or successor, "a princely bargain" as Talleyrand sor-

rowfully put it—unlike Bonaparte, he did not share the blindness of Old Europe to the potential of the New World. The land thus cheaply acquired subsequently became thirteen new states and made the pursuit of Manifest Destiny to the Pacific infinitely easier. Andrew Johnson's administration capped this deal by buying from Russia, for a mere \$7,200,000, Alaska, over twice the size of Texas, which became the forty-ninth state in 1959. This large-scale acquisitive imperialism was conducted, it must be said, within the ideology of the Privileged Hemisphere, made specific in the Monroe Doctrine, in which established settler regimes were entitled to consolidate their position in the hemisphere while Old Europe was forbidden any further incursion.

Hence there is no denying that the United States was the beneficiary of imperialism from the start. Though self-liberating, it was an imperialist creation, and remained one, enlarging its borders as and when it needed space and opportunity offered. Unlike Britain and France it did not export its surplus population and land hunger overseas but overland, and it did not call itself an empire but a Union: its expansion took place within a democratic context and its acquisitions quickly acceded to statehood.

Yet there were exceptions even to this. The twenty islands known as Hawaii became part of the United States by a gradual process of commercial and missionary penetrations familiar in the British Empire, in the years after 1820. Despite the fact that Hawaii was 2090 miles west of San Francisco, and its population overwhelmingly of non-European origin, the islands were constituted a US territory in 1900 and became a state in 1959. By contrast, the Philippines, ceded to the United States by Spain in 1898 as spoils of the Spanish-American War, were treated as a temporary colony. Washington was initially unsure what to do about them and resolved its doubts in a characteristically American way. President McKinley told a delegation to the White House: "I am not

ashamed to tell you, gentlemen, that I went down on my knees and prayed to Almighty God for light and guidance that one night. And one night later it came this way . . . there was nothing left for us to do but to take them all and to educate the Filipinos and uplift and civilize and Christianize them, and by God's grace do the very best we could by them, as our fellow men for whom Christ also died." The Organic Act of 1902 made the islands an unincorporated territory of the United States and the process towards independence began immediately, continuing until 1946 when the new Republic was established.

The Philippines, then, were a US exercise in shouldering what Kipling termed "the white man's burden," that is, duties undertaken by the advanced nations not for power or profit but under moral and religious impulses to bring "the lesser breeds" (Kipling's term) into the enlightened circle of civilization. Moral imperialism has deep religious roots, for the Spanish and Portuguese empires, though undertaken primarily for profit, had conversion of the indigenous inhabitants to Christianity as their secondary and justificatory purpose. Indeed, colonial America itself was to some extent a moral, religious, and missionary creation. What gave moral imperialism its force, however, were early nineteenth-century efforts to suppress the slave trade. Britain outlawed it in 1807 and the British navy was given the job of putting the law into force. This was far from easy: countries like Spain, Portugal, and even France had to be bribed into cooperating, and initially the United States was an obstacle to enforcement. It is worth recalling that in the period 1815–1860, the Southern states actively promoted the spread of slavery not only in the continental United States but also in neighboring states. Had the South prevailed, or the Civil War ended in stalemate, it is likely that a white-dominated empire, based on slavery, would have emerged far south of the Mason-Dixon Line, embracing much of Central America. As it was, the victory of the North

gave Washington an added reason for joining the Royal Navy in putting down the slave trade. In one area, the United States had led the way. Between 1801 and 1815, America not only refused to pay tribute to the pirates of the Barbary States (Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli) but was the first to take punitive action against them to release US nationals held as slaves. Stephen Decatur's successful campaign against Tripoli, 1804–1805, was the earliest American contribution to moral imperialism. After the Civil War, the US Navy and its civil and missionary adjuncts were active alongside the British, especially in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, in ensuring freedom of the seas, putting down piracy and hostage-taking, opening up territories which forbade Western commerce, and carrying out punitive actions against states, large and small, which offended Western notions of international law and morality.

One area where moral imperialism was active was the Persian Gulf. In Arabia, slavery and slaving were endemic, run by the fierce Wahhabi religious sect, whose leaders were the forebears of the Saudi ruling family. The Wahhabis also sponsored piracy in the Indian Ocean, threatening Britain's trade with India. From the first decade of the nineteenth century, Britain made allies of the Gulf States, such as Bahrain, Qatar, and Muscat, which resisted Wahhabi encroachment, and these allies provided footholds for a local form of moral imperialism which lasted into the oil age. Operations were coordinated from Bushire on the Persian coast, and sons of the local rulers were sent to the School of Princes in India to be brought up in Western ways. The Americans eventually joined in this regional moral imperialism, though in what the British regarded as a perverse fashion. They chose as their chief local allies the Wahhabis who, in the convulsions following the First World War, became rulers of Saudi Arabia and owners of the world's largest oil reserves. It is not surprising that the Saudis have directly financed and indirectly sponsored

Moslem terrorism, just as their predecessors supported slave-trading and piracy.

The United States, as a Pacific power with a two-ocean navy, joined in various exercises of moral imperialism in the last part of the nineteenth century, notably the suppression of the Boxer Rising in China (1900), when it contributed troops to the expedition of the five imperialist powers (Russia, Britain, France, Germany, and Japan). President Wilson's League of Nations proposal was, in part, a form of moral imperialism: it provided for Germany's former colonies and the provinces of the Turkish Empire to be taken into trusteeship by the victorious Allies, on the model of the Philippines, and prepared for self-government. The Senate's failure to ratify US membership of the League prevented America from participating in this experiment. The German Pacific colonies of the Caroline, Marshall, and Mariana Islands were entrusted to Japan, which used them as bases from which to attack Pearl Harbor in 1941. In 1945 the United Nations was given sovereignty, entrusted them to the United States, and thereafter they were run by the US Department of the Interior.

In retrospect the most important American acts of moral imperialism in the nineteenth century were the two expeditions by Commodore Matthew C. Perry, 1853–1854, to Japan, to persuade this hermit state to allow in Western commerce. America had already, in China, engaged in an effort to get the authorities to adopt an Open Door policy to all Western nations as the only alternative to piecemeal colonization. The same arguments applied to Japan, and were taken so seriously by the Japanese elite as to inspire a national effort to industrialize and to build powerful armed forces. The Perry episode can therefore be presented as a form of anti-imperialism. But it can also, and perhaps more accurately, be seen as a form of yet another kind of empire-building—commercial or cultural imperialism, what many would now term globalization.

This is the process, unconscious or delib-

erate, whereby a stronger power pulls a weaker one into its economic and cultural orbit. It is, but need not be, associated with the other more direct form of empire. As such, it is as old as humanity. Indeed, globalization is pre-human. Among flowers and trees, invertebrates and mammals, a continuous process of colonization takes place as successful species move into fresh territory, alongside existing organisms, which disappear if too weak to coexist. *Homo sapiens*, at the top of the evolutionary tree, was a globalizer *ab initio*, spreading into all the habitable portions of the earth's surface. The more successful human communities spread their culture and their products—the two were usually inseparable and always remain close—from prehistoric times. The early empires saw their cultural matrix, identified with the objects they made and built, as the source of their existing power and the means to acquire more. In early dynastic times the ancient Egyptians, around 3,000 BC, developed a culture of extraordinary appeal and clarity which spread up the entire Nile Valley and remained virtually intact for three millennia. Their invention of the stone column was the foundation of all architecture, an early example of globalization; and Egyptian styles are still common in postmodern buildings today. When the multi-racial Empire of the Medes and Persians came into existence, the Archaemenian kings developed a cultural matrix which underpinned their rule. To build their immense palace-capital at Persepolis they imported craftsmen from all over the ancient Near East. But all were obliged to build and decorate within the norms of the matrix.

The Greeks used commercial and cultural imperialism as a substitute for direct rule. A collection of city-states, often at odds with each other, they exported their surplus population in the form of colonies, closely modelled on the mother city, each with a harbor and warehouses, a quarter for merchants and artisans, a stadium, an odeon, a gymnasium, and a theater, all of them big enough to accommodate the entire free

population of the city, for political and cultural purposes. These outposts often grew wealthier than the mother-cities and formed a rich powerful archipelago throughout the central and eastern Mediterranean. The Greeks called it *oikumene*, an area of civilization where Greek norms were paramount, and this ecumenical empire was contrasted with what they called “chaos”—the surrounding barbarism and savagery. The Greek *oikumene* was inherited by the Romans and became the basis of their enormous Empire, though the Romans, with their passion for uniform law, insisted on transforming the *colonia* into provinces and thus put together an old-style territorial empire, with all its strengths and weaknesses.

Western society is the product of the marriage of the Christian religion to Greek and Latin culture. We thus have imperial impulses, in various models, at our very roots, the Americans no less than the Old Europeans. There is an important difference here between the West and Islam. Though Islam is imperialist by nature, it is essentially religious imperialism, ruling through the Islamic state. The West, unlike Islam, underwent both the Renaissance and the Reformation, thereby acquiring strong secular characteristics and refreshing its roots in Greco-Roman civilization, with its respect for impartial and universal law and competing modes of government including democracy.

Hence in the twentieth and still more the twenty-first centuries, the forms of moral, commercial, and cultural imperialism emanating from the West are essentially secular. We no longer speak of “Christianizing the world,” a phrase in wide use up to 1914. But “democratizing the world,” whether spoken or not, is our aim. Behind this lies the belief that when functioning democracies become the norm, international law is more likely to be observed, free trade to spread, real incomes to increase, and the world to become a freer, healthier, more secure, and contented place. In the creation of this *oikumene*, or ecumenical

world of Western-style civilization, America is allotted the prime role by geography and history, economics and demography, culture and philosophy.

For America, September 11 was a new Great Awakening. It realized, for the first time, that it was a globalized entity itself. It no longer had frontiers. Its boundaries were the world, for from whatever part of the world harbored its enemies, it could be attacked, and if such enemies possessed weapons of mass destruction, mortally attacked. For this reason America was obliged to construct a new strategic doctrine, replacing totally that of National Security Council paper 68 of 1950, which laid down the doctrine of containment. In a globalized world the United States now has to anticipate its enemies, search out and destroy their bases, and disarm states likely to aid them. I call this defensive imperialism. It is a novel kind, but embraces elements of all the old. Significantly, NSC 68 of 1950 specifically repudiates imperialism. Its replacement will necessarily embrace it in its new form. There are compelling reasons why the United States is uniquely endowed to exercise this kind of global authority.

First, America has the language of the twenty-first century. English is already the first world language in many respects, and this century will see its rapid extension and consolidation. As first the Greeks, then the Romans discovered, possession of a common language is the first vital and energizing step towards embracing common norms of law, behavior, and culture. A more secure world will be legislated for, policed, and adjudicated in English. Second, America has, and will continue to acquire, the technology of the twenty-first century, its lead being widened by its success in providing the clearest climate of freedom in which inventors, pioneers, and entrepreneurs of all kinds can operate. In the nineteenth century, the great age of the formal empires, the imperialist thrust was backed by the industrial revolution, producing manufactured goods much cheaper and in far greater

quantity than ever before. In 1800 it was Asia which produced the majority (57 percent) of world manufactured output, the West only 29 percent; by 1900 the West was producing 86 percent, Asia only 10 percent. Today, America's production of world wealth, both absolutely and relatively, is accelerating. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, it added \$5 trillion to its annual GDP. By 2050 the US share of global output will constitute over a quarter of the world total and will be as much as three times as big as, for instance, the European Union.

Traditionally, successful imperialism has reflected high birth-rates and the ability to export large surplus populations. The climax of European imperialism in the nineteenth century coincided with the European population explosion. America has never exported people overseas. On the contrary, its growing power and wealth has reflected its ability to attract and absorb them. That continues. American now accepts more immigrants than the rest of the world put together. The amazing ability of groups like the Cubans, the Hong Kong Chinese, the Vietnamese, and other new arrivals to strike roots and create wealth is a key part of America's continuing success story. But America also has a high birth rate. Its population is now coming up to the 300 million mark. By 2050 it will be over 400 million. By contrast, Europe's population will shrink and the percentage of working age will fall rapidly. Population forecasts are notoriously unreliable and some predictions of what is likely to happen in Europe (and Japan) in this century are so alarming as to be discounted. But clearly there is a marked and growing contrast between Old Europe and Young America. And the combination of an accelerating technology and an expanding world-force will be irresistible in terms of economic and military power.

The Bush administration is only beginning to grasp the implications of the course on which it has embarked. It still, albeit with growing difficulty, speaks the language of anti-imperialism. But that is the jargon of the twentieth century, or its second half; who says it will be the prevailing discourse of the twenty-first? As it happens, in America's own parlance, imperialism became a derogatory term only during the Civil War, when the South accused the North of behaving like a European empire. It then became politically correct to speak only of "American exceptionalism." But it is worth recalling that up to 1860 "empire" was not a term of abuse in the United States. George Washington himself spoke of "the rising American Empire." Jefferson, aware of the dilemma, claimed that America was "an Empire for liberty." That is what America is becoming again, in fact if not in name. America's search for the security against terrorism and rogue states goes hand in hand with liberating their oppressed peoples. From the Evil Empire to an Empire for Liberty is a giant step, a contrast as great as the appalling images of the wasted twentieth century and the brightening dawn of the twenty-first. But America has the musculature and the will to take giant steps, as it has shown in the past.

One thing is clear: America is unlikely to cease to be an empire in the fundamental sense. It will not share its sovereignty with anyone. It will continue to promote international efforts of proven worth, like GATT, and to support military alliances like NATO where appropriate. But it will not allow the UN or any other organization to infringe on its natural right to defend itself as it sees fit. The new globalization of security will proceed with the UN if possible, without it if necessary. The empire for liberty is the dynamic of change.

Dreiser in 1925

by Jeffrey Hart

The date 1925 helps us to look at Theodore Dreiser's work through a clear mental lens, unblurred by the political-cultural wars that have clouded estimates of Dreiser's reputation ever since. Nineteen twenty-five was the date of Dreiser's novel *An American Tragedy* and much else in that annus mirabilis at the center of what deserves, like the 1850s, to be called an American Renaissance. Dreiser merits rescue now—at least *Sister Carrie* (1900) and *An American Tragedy* do.

In a famous and deservedly influential essay entitled "Reality in America" (1946), Lionel Trilling used Dreiser as an example of what he wished to censure. His essay—in part an attack on the cultural history of V. L. Parrington—can also be read as an anticipatory answer to F. O. Matthiessen's advocacy of Dreiser in *Theodore Dreiser* (1951), published the year after Matthiessen's suicide. Trilling was intent upon defending the activity of literature—writing it, reading it, discussing it—against an assortment of simplifiers, because, as he said in the Preface to *The Liberal Imagination* (1950), "literature is the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of the variousness, possibility, complexity and difficulty" of experience. Among the simplifications were the hearty progressive ideology of Parrington, the reductions of Alfred Kinsey's sexology, and the tendency of liberalism to slide in the direction of fellow-traveling and Stalinism.

Trilling in this essay courageously entered what he called "the dark and bloody crossroads where literature and politics meet." The dates of his treatment of Dreiser—April 1946 in *The Nation*, 1950 in republication in *The Liberal Imagination*—are important markers on the bloody crossroads. Nineteen forty-eight was the pivotal year. It saw the Czech coup, the Waldorf "Peace" Conference, and Henry Wallace's fellow-traveling presidential campaign. For Trilling, these triumphs of ideology were defections from the liberal imagination, failures of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty. And Dreiser, he thought, was deeply implicated in those failures, not only through his membership in the Communist Party (he had joined in 1945) but also in the "ungainliness" of his prose style, his "vulgar materialism," and the "dim, awkward speculation" of his ideas.

"Reality in America" certainly caused lasting damage to Dreiser's reputation. Yet in that essay Trilling can be convicted of allowing his polemical impulse to interfere with his perception of Dreiser as a novelist. First of all, Trilling quotes almost nothing from, fails to address himself to, Dreiser's narrative prose. He does quote a couple of collector's items where Dreiser, speaking from outside the narrative, interpolates some pseudo-philosophizing—Dreiser himself apparently valued this stuff—and Trilling easily convicts him of intellectual fatuity.

But he does not, in my judgment, successfully prosecute Dreiser the novelist.

Let us return to the year 1925. That year you would be reading Hemingway's first substantial book, *In Our Time*. There was also *The Great Gatsby*. American poets were bursting in the night sky like shooting stars. And it was the year of Dreiser's *American Tragedy*.

Assuming that by 1925 we have already read *Sister Carrie*, what do we make of Dreiser? For one thing, he is a conspicuous celebrator of the city. Coming from Terre Haute, he is that proverbial figure, the Young Man from the Provinces. Like Rousseau and Julien Sorel in Paris, and Boswell in London, he feels a transforming joy at what he sees. Here is Boswell, first coming in view of London: "When we first came upon Highgate Hill, I was all life and joy." Boswell exults in the city's beckoning possibility. Such response to the city runs counter to Dreiser's overall moral intention, but that tension makes his exultation all the more compelling. Dreiser is drawn to the city even though many of his characters are destroyed there.

It is a fact that so many American writers have hated the city. Jefferson did. T. S. Eliot did. So did Thoreau and Stephen Crane. Poor Hart Crane tried to celebrate the city with his symbol of the Brooklyn Bridge, but could not make that work, though it might have been a good idea. Theodore Dreiser, perhaps in spite of himself, wrote splendidly about the delights—the heretofore forbidden delights—of the metropolis.

Carrie was an apt student of fortune's ways. . . . Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion. They spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves. When she came within earshot of their pleading, desire in her bent a willing ear. Ah, ha, the voices of the so-called inanimate. Who shall yet translate the language of the stones?

Dreiser translated the language of the stones. He kept expressing the powerful emotions aroused by the city, with its grand

hotels, its dark panelled restaurants and bars, its glitter under the night sky, its palpable sexuality, its theaters and cigar smoke, its money. No doubt Dreiser, this novelist child of Terre Haute, could have said, adapting Flaubert, "Carrie Meeber, c'est moi."

Perhaps Dreiser, as a moralist, would have considered the following description part of the miseducation of Clyde Griffiths, who has become a bellhop at the luxurious Green-Davidson Hotel in Kansas City:

There, at midnight even, before each of the three entrances—one facing each of three streets—was a doorman in a maroon coat with many buttons and a high-trimmed and long-visored maroon cap. And inside, behind looped and fluted French curtains, were the still blazing lights, the *à la carte* dining room and the American grill near the corner still open. And about them there were many taxis and cars. And there was music always—from somewhere.

Music from somewhere? It is the music of Dreiser's excitement over the Green-Davidson Hotel.

When you touch Dreiser's prose at its best, as here, you get the direct blast of unmoralized attraction. Such responses to the beauties and energies of the American city were present far more often in paint and architecture than they were in prose or poetry. The circle around Robert Henri, including John Sloane and George Bellows, expressed and celebrated, though sometimes ambiguously, the new energies of America around the turn of the century. One thinks of George Bellows's famous painting of the excavation for Charles McKim's Pennsylvania Station in 1907, as well as of the works of Childe Hassam, Birge Harrison, John Edwin Jackson, and the triumphalist but gorgeous displays of Stanford White. The "Ash Can" realists dominated American painting until overwhelmed by the European modernism announced by the 1913 Armory Show. Somewhat analogously, Dreiser's standing was affected by the con-

centration and brilliance of the modernist writers. The realist painters are being revalued upward today. Perhaps that current of reassessment can help us look at Dreiser with fresh eyes, to appreciate the wondering vitality he brought to his encounter with urban reality:

Clyde stared, felt himself tremble the least bit with excitement, then thanking his advisor for his kindness, went directly to a green marbled doorway which opened from the rear of the drug store into the lobby of the hotel. Once through it, he beheld a lobby, the like of which, for all his years but because of the timorous poverty that had restrained him from exploring such a world, was more arresting, quite, than anything he had seen before. It was so lavish. Under his feet was a checkered black and white marble floor. Above him was a coppered and stained and gilded ceiling. And supporting this a veritable forest of black marble columns as highly polished as the floor.

There is no homemade “philosophizing” in such passages, no cracker-barrel determinism, no vulgar Clarence Darrowism, no paste-gems of “fine writing,” such as Trilling correctly cited against Dreiser in other instances. When Dreiser is telling the truth about the city, garish perhaps as here, but pulsing with energy, with possibility, he writes in a direct and muscular prose that expresses, from Clyde’s point of view, the city and more than a hint of what it offers. He wrote about the city truthfully and with a power no American author had shown before him, and perhaps since.

In *Theodore Dreiser*, F. O. Matthiessen wrote of the novelist’s “primitive” strength. In “an authentic sense,” thought Matthiessen,

he was a primitive, not unlike the occasional American sign painter, who has found that he possessed the dogged skills to create a portrait likeness and then has bent all the force of a rugged character to realize this verity.

There is more than a touch of sentimental pastoral in this vision of the sign painter. For a highly sophisticated Harvard professor who had just published *The Achievement of T. S. Eliot* (1947) and done an immense amount of work on such rarified sensibilities as Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, and Melville, not to mention Henry James, it was entirely admirable—an imaginative stretch—for Matthiessen to attempt that last book on Dreiser. But Matthiessen longed for a will-o’-the-wisp “solidarity” with an idealized working class—he even thought he sensed it in 1948 when campaigning in South Boston for Henry Wallace. The actual working class in that area, however, disappointed him by voting for Truman. Wallace voters were back in Cambridge clustered not around factories but in Harvard Square.

Dreiser was not primitive. His work resembles Balzac’s, which he discovered in the Carnegie Library and saw as trying to present large blocks of continuous experience. Dreiser was a highly talented newspaperman who happened to have omnivorous interests and abilities far beyond ordinary newspaper work. Every so often newspaper experience does give strength to an artist, as it did to Stephen Crane, Ernest Hemingway, and Ring Lardner.

Though Dreiser strongly evoked the possibilities of the modern city, he also felt in it what may be a peculiarly American emptiness and loneliness: a kind of loneliness not ordinarily felt in the old and long-lived-in streets of Paris and London, but felt in the American city as in the vast American spaces or in their lost small towns. I have mentioned here some evocative comparisons with painting. The final scene of Chapter One of *Sister Carrie* could have come from Edward Hopper, that virtuoso of American loneliness. Carrie has just stepped off the train from her home in the country and stands on the platform of the Chicago station. On the train she had briefly befriended another passenger, a man named Drouet. She has brought pitifully little with her to Chicago. The train pulls out, leaving Carrie

on the platform. Drouet "was looking back. When he saw that she saw him and was safe with her sister he turned to go, sending back the shadow of a smile. Only Carrie saw it. She felt something lost to her as he moved away. When he disappeared she felt his absence thoroughly. With her sister she was much alone, a lone figure in a tossing, thoughtless sea." An Edward Hopper, perhaps *Morning Sun* or *Automat*.

In *An American Tragedy* Dreiser wrote a peculiar kind of tragedy. It lacks almost all of the characteristics of traditional tragedy. Clyde is not a noble spirit brought down by a ruinous flaw. He is not an overreacher doomed by hubris. Nor is he a man destroyed by wild sexual passion, or hate, or jealousy, or rage. He is not characterized by great pride, great gifts, or towering achievements. He is no Oedipus, no Othello, no Lear. His emotional capacity is unimpressive. He is weak, irresolute, scarcely capable of choice, almost entirely lacking in redeeming virtues, far beneath tragic stature. In fact, he does not even commit murder. He wants to be rid of the pregnant Roberta Alden, a factory girl. He simply fails to rescue her when she falls overboard into the lake. He had planned to kill her; but he did not, exactly. He is beneath genuine criminality. His whole life is a botch.

Yet as the story builds, we experience something powerful, a sense of fate that while not tragic in the classic sense eventually does elicit the central tragic emotions: inevitability, suffering, pity, fear, terror. Clyde's very fecklessness finally overpowers him. When the preparations for Clyde's electrocution at Sing Sing go forward, they seem a coefficient of the nemesis, the inevitability, that has stalked the story almost from the beginning. Clyde is the object of great, of irresistible forces. We feel this, despite the fact that he is almost a nullity. Throughout, we have mostly despised him. Even his name is silly: it goes with sleeve-garters. Yet when it is over we say with Hamlet, "The rest is silence." To mention

the Prince in connection with Clyde Griffiths is to laugh. Perhaps Dreiser should have called this *A Democratic Tragedy*. Maybe in a sense he did—"American," as Tocqueville taught, being a kind of synonym for "democratic."

"The rest is silence." Yes, even Clyde Griffiths calls forth the great words, though he certainly is not borne like a soldier from the stage. One thing that gives *An American Tragedy* its power is Dreiser's ability to make the society that surrounds Clyde so palpable. In this we have the strength of Dreiser the newspaperman, with a newspaperman's grasp of detailed actuality. Dreiser knows how it is to be a bellhop, how to be on the lam after a reckless caper, how it is to be a minor manager in a factory that makes detachable shirt-collars, what the social structure is in a small New York upstate town such as the fictional Lycurgus, named by Dreiser perhaps after the Greek lawgiver. We understand that it is this society that in innumerable ways put Clyde on the final skids toward the electric chair. Clyde, indeed like Dreiser, came from a small town and was captivated by the glittering things of life as he saw them even in Lycurgus. They were beyond his grasp, but . . . perhaps someday.

Having made his way to Lycurgus, gaining a low management position, he commences an affair with a factory girl, Roberta Alden. But he simultaneously becomes enraptured by Sondra Finchley, a daughter of the Lycurgus upper-crust. To him she is a glamorous being. She is pretty and baby-talks, likes tennis, boating, and is sought after by the college boys of Lycurgus. "Sondra," so comically snooty a name, not a decent "Sandra." "Sondra": absurd, but magical to him. Now Roberta becomes pregnant. Certainly he should marry her. Their attempts to find an abortionist come to nothing. Roberta's origins are lowly, but she has natural grace, natural intelligence. As it becomes clear that Clyde thinks he must kill her, the reader begins to think that he himself would marry Roberta if he had the chance. Clyde schemes to kill her in a

boating accident, but his plan misfires. Nevertheless, Roberta accidentally falls overboard and drowns. Clyde is suspected of murder and, naturally, bungles his escape and is caught, tried, and convicted of murder. We are not surprised to learn that Dreiser based all this on an actual murder case. Dreiser knew courtrooms, and he produces a gripping trial, which can have only one result, moving toward it with the relentlessness of fate.

Clyde Griffiths cannot make the decision that would have saved him from the electric chair: forget "Sondra" and marry the woman who actually loves him. Similarly, Hurstwood in *Sister Carrie* fails to resist the temptation that sets him on the path that leads to suicide. All he had to do is resist taking the money from the safe of his employer Fitzgerald and Moy (a mahogany-and-cigar-smoke sort of restaurant that enhances life in the city and embodies opportunity and temptation). Hurstwood, too, is a feckless soul: in the very act of theft, he wavers. F. O. Matthiessen takes this moment as suggesting the gamble that the economic arrangements of capitalist society impose on a man like Hurstwood. This is quite a stretch. Hurstwood is well-established; nothing is imposed on him. He is possessed by a romantic derangement, and in this he resembles Clyde. He is entirely free not to take the money. Paradoxically, his half-hearted exercise of freedom endows his suicide with a seeming inevitability. The inexorableness at the core of this novel consorts with Dreiser's determinism, but such determinism is not necessary to it. The fate of his characters is the consequence of choice. Dreiser's mass of detail, his powerful verisimilitude, make that society feel like an overwhelming force. Yet, as Dreiser shows us, society is not so overwhelming a force that both Clyde and Hurstwood could not have made decisions that would have led to vastly different fates.

I do not suppose Dreiser would dispute that. But he would doubtless say that the decision to resist the destructive temptation would be more heroic than it would be

reasonable to require, and that society in the form of advertising, movies, the entire glamour industry, imposes an almost irresistible romantic illusion. Yet surely the society Dreiser knew was not unique in feeding romantic illusion. Literature is full of it. Prince Paris and King David were not victims of Clara Bow.

However that may be, we have to deal with Dreiser's sense of the fate of the individual in the society of Clyde and Hurstwood, and the way he sees things implacably stacked against them. This brings us back to Lionel Trilling and to Dreiser's politics: to the question of whether they should be taken at all seriously and to what extent they intrude upon or diminish Dreiser's literary achievement.

At bottom Dreiser desires, or says he desires, a society with less social aspiration, of which romantic illusion is probably a part. That is, Dreiser wants more equality. He dislikes the fact, as he sees it, that people are always moving up or moving down, with the downward movement sometimes culminating in personal disaster. Whoever is down, he believes, is really out. This has been cushioned by the later welfare state and social safety net. But to say that does not get to the essence of Dreiser's desire for his kind of society. I myself think that this ideal is really only a velleity for a man who was so drawn to the magic and possibility of the city, which he described so well, and to the appeal of romance, which he portrayed so convincingly and with which he himself was famously and conspicuously entangled.

Dreiser does not approve of much mobility. He desires much greater social stability, that is, what others might call stagnation and shared scarcity. He desires real equality. To achieve it, we can assume he would limit opportunity, imposing a stern discipline upon those who desire more—those, that is, who accept inequality as a natural by-product of competition. Opportunity always produces inequality. Dreiser prefers a stable society to a dynamic one, and he favors solidarity over the efforts and

rewards of ambition. Security, solidarity, and real equality would guard Clyde and Hurstwood from themselves, we are supposed to think. One might say that Clyde and Hurstwood made fatal decisions and might well do so in any society, and that people are better off with freedom, opportunity, and a dynamic society. But we can see what Dreiser's "socialism" amounted to, as well as the socialism of F. O. Matthiessen, his most intelligent champion. It is tempting to regard such politics as entirely notional and unserious, just earnest talk. We should take both Dreiser and Matthiessen where they matter most: Dreiser as a peculiarly powerful novelist, Matthiessen as a man of intelligence and taste, a great teacher, but also an ideologue whose famous "Christian-socialism" and fellow-traveling amounted to intellectually catastrophic sentimentality.

Finally, why does the fate of the worm-like Clyde exhaust us, wrench us, so unexpectedly?

Strategically, it was a brilliant stroke for Dreiser to endow Clyde with almost no redeeming qualities, except perhaps amiability and weak good looks. Though he achieves low-level factory responsibilities and Roberta sees him as a way to better herself, her love seems genuine. Through

his weakness, he is well endowed with destructive capability, potentially disastrous for anyone who depends on him. Yet at the end, in the Sing Sing death house, being shaved and otherwise prepared for the Chair, he is nakedly human. Here I will make bold to mention Lear, naked on the heath, stripped of kingship, clothes, every other essence, and now alone. And this in itself is terrifying. Clyde, we feel, is a worm. But by the end of the novel he has transcended his degradation. He possesses an irreducible humanity which we share with him. However we are situated in society, moving up or down or whatever, we resemble Clyde in knowing that we are awash in the cataract of time, can do nothing about it, and, like Clyde, are like animals on the runway at the slaughterhouse. That is the source of the tragic power here. Dreiser in 1925 made us know Clyde so well. Though justice cries out that he die for his crimes against Roberta, finally in his dying we possess our first and last sense of affinity with him. We will join him in the democratic and stable society of death. Using the unlikely example of Clyde Griffiths, Dreiser here, as Frost once said literature might, raises human life to a higher regard.

Discourse: For Stanley Rosen

by Geoffrey Hill

I

As to whether there persists—enlighten me—
a dialectic: labour into desire.
Forgive my small vocabulary that tries
and abides your patience. What a wonder's
man the philosopher set on his throne.
What a wonder he is, and how
abysmal. I would not have you say
I speak ungratefully; or that there's self
going spare in our unsparing tribute.
Arbeitsknecht by adoption, I never
slam down advice, even to shake the building.
Perhaps (but not likely) I may be still
a whizz at ordinary language and you
mishear things.

No, put this way: cancel, expunge, annul,
self-reference. Philosophy keeps up
embarrassment and expense. I'd quit us
of further scars had these now been incurred.
You're magisterial in judgement's gorge
where the rocks are at all angles and the stream
huggers its way through:
let's flip with self-projection's paper boat.
Language not revealing to the elect
only; and wild descenders pierced by good.
So few of us absolved when what we write
sets us to rights on some scam-scale of justice.
You're magisterial in your own conviction.
And a clown with it, and a judge of clowns.

Susurrations of winter: voicing stems mistune
a glass harmonica at my good ear.
The alien's close to home, the changeling's not
too much a prodigy or wastrel; lovers
and children not inimical by rote.
Something here even so. Our well dug-in
language pitches us as it finds—
I tell myself
don't wreck a good phrase simply to boost sense—
granted its dark places, the fabled burden;
its loops and extraordinary progressions,
its mere conundrums forms and rites of discourse;
its bleak littoral swept by bursts of sunlight;
its earthen genius auditing the spheres.

London journal

The elusive truth

by John Gross

Fresh from its triumphs in Iraq, BBC television has turned its attention to Kim Philby, Guy Burgess, Donald Maclean, and Anthony Blunt. The series which it has been devoting to them, *Cambridge Spies*, is no small affair, either. Four episodes, each an hour long; a budget of some £6 million; superior casting; buckets of advance publicity—the whole thing was plainly intended to be a jewel in the Corporation's crown.

The early nineteenth-century prime minister Lord Melbourne is said to have remarked, after he had been persuaded to see a play by Ben Jonson, "I knew it was going to be dull, but I never thought it would be so damnably dull." Anyone familiar with the current state of the BBC would have been naive not to foresee that *Cambridge Spies* was going to hold up a distorting mirror to its subject, but just how damnably distorting it was going to be would have been hard to guess.

For a start, the series gave no idea of the nature of the regime which Philby and the others chose to serve. No mention of purges or persecutions, nothing about the millions murdered and the millions more enslaved. This in turn meant that viewers didn't have to consider the question of how much the Cambridge quartet themselves could (and should) have known about what was going on in the Soviet Union—though there was a clear implication that they couldn't reasonably have been expected to know more than they did at the time.

They were innocents, in fact. They were also idealists, who were animated above all by their detestation of fascism. "To fight fascism," somebody says at one point, "you have to be a communist," and they are words which might serve as a motto for the entire series. So much for everyone else who opposed fascism. So much, in particular, for the British social and political establishment, whose members are portrayed almost exclusively as boobies or brutes—many of them already more than halfway to fascism themselves.

"We didn't know," "We had no other choice if we wanted to stop Hitler"—these are ancient ploys, which have been used countless times in attempts to justify signing up with Stalin. But if the basic strategy which the series adopted was all too familiar, it could lay claim to undoubted novelty in points of detail.

Two incidents, for example, are shown playing a crucial role in pushing the quartet towards communism. In one of them, a Jewish girlfriend of Philby's at Cambridge is subjected to Nazi-style insults. In another, college domestic workers who are on strike are beaten up by right-wing undergraduates. The most notable thing about both episodes, in the context of a supposed docudrama, is that neither of them actually happened: they were both dreamed up by the scriptwriter. And there are many other fabrications, including a KGB attempt to assassinate Franco which fails because Philby,

decent and humane fellow that he is, can't bring himself to pull the trigger.

Some of the inaccuracies are trivial in themselves, though they do a good deal to color the atmosphere. Others are of considerable historical significance. The fifth Cambridge spy, John Cairncross, makes only a brief appearance, for example: he is shown working as a wartime code-breaker, and rejecting Blunt's suggestion that he start passing on information to the Russians. In reality, as Oleg Gordievsky has pointed out in a trenchant analysis of the series, during the war Cairncross kept the KGB supplied with a steady flow of decrypts, including the first news they received of work on the atomic bomb. You wonder why the scriptwriter decided to play down his importance. Possibly it was for no more serious reason than that he lacked the *Brideshead* glamour which the series makes so much of in his four colleagues.

American viewers will no doubt have a chance to see *Cambridge Spies* in due course (and when they do they will find that most of its references to Americans are hostile and scornful). Meanwhile, it has come in for some sharp criticism in the British press, and the response of the BBC and others involved in making it has been almost as revealing as the series itself.

The BBC controller of drama commissioning was quick to leap to the program's defense. She spoke of it highlighting the spies' "humanity, their fallibility mixed with their convictions," and insisted that any other approach would be hopelessly bland:

We don't forget to be witty and cheeky and a little bit controversial, which we like. Otherwise we are going to have a drama which says, "What-ho, these chaps are traitors and we hate them." It's much more complicated than that.

What-ho indeed. One wouldn't give much for the career prospects of a BBC official who adopted as flippant a tone discussing a program on, shall we say, the history of apartheid.

Then the actors weighed in. Samuel West, who plays Blunt, denied that Blunt had done any harm, and compared the spies' communism to protests against the war in Iraq—they were both "patriotic responses." Toby Stephens, who plays Philby, reflected that "there is something very appealing about being a lone wolf, out there doing daring deeds, just you and a pistol." The actor who plays Maclean made no bones about his admiration for the spies: "they were heroic." The actor who plays Burgess had clearly fallen a little bit in love with his character: "He's such fun, he's winging it always. Who doesn't want to live like that?"

Well, we all know that actors say the darndest things. But we also live in an age in which their political pronouncements get listened to. And it is worth adding that in any serious poll to nominate the most promising young British actor, West and Stephens would be among the top contenders.

The author of the series, Peter Moffat, was more cautious. He admitted that he had taken liberties, but insisted that his version of events was "rooted in reality." At the same time he maintained that he was writing drama, not history, which gave him the right to alter the facts—as though his alterations were purely for dramatic effect, and didn't have any political significance.

But the last word must be left with the BBC itself. Trying to wind up the controversy, a spokesman for the Corporation offered the thought that, given the nature of the people involved in the story and what they were doing, "the truth is elusive." How can people say such things with a straight face? But they can. I was reminded of a remark Oliver Stone is reported to have made after he had spent thirty hours filming an interview with Fidel Castro last year, and failed to ask him about human rights abuses or political oppression: "With Mr. Castro it is hard to say what is evasive and what is not. And his elusiveness is always charming."

It is depressing to reflect that for large

numbers of people who have been watching *Cambridge Spies*, especially the younger ones, the series is likely to be pretty well their only source of information on the subject. We can also brace ourselves for more programs in the same vein. For in terms of the BBC as it is at present, the series is anything but an aberration. It ties in all too well with prevailing beliefs and attitudes.

In domestic politics, the Corporation's bias is now shameless. On the Middle East, it is virtually conducting its own foreign policy. This is in spite of the fact that it is a public body, funded by public money. (Its principal source of income is the license fee which everyone in Britain who owns a television set has to pay.) And along with the abandonment of any pretence of objectivity—except when lofty policy pronouncements are being made—there has been a cultural decline which grows steadily worse.

Pockets of excellence remain. Some of the traditions which made the BBC one of the great achievements of twentieth-century Britain survive. Until recently even its most disaffected critic would have stopped short of recommending privatization: there was too much to lose. And perhaps there still is—but the prospect no longer seems unthinkable.

Meanwhile other British institutions are under pressure to keep pace with changing times. Some collude with their fate, or even welcome it; a few fight back. Universities, for instance, are finding it hard to resist Government demands that they take more students from poor areas, even if those students don't come up to what would normally be the required standard: the financial penalties for refusing to do so are too great.

But the leading music colleges, faced with similar demands and penalties, are standing firm. They are also trying to fight off semi-official pressure to be less "elitist" and more "inclusive"—which in practice means cutting down on classical music and introducing pop and rock.

One institution which provides a particularly useful index of changing public values is the National Portrait Gallery. Founded by the Victorians as a kind of national Valhalla, until little more than twenty years ago it still didn't display portraits of living people. But we have changed all that. Today it is bright, brisk, and up-to-date; and in some respects, at least, it is undoubtedly more inclusive.

As a quick experiment, I recently took a look at the postcards on sale in the Gallery shop. There are some 300 different ones, among them portraits of contemporary footballers, fashion models, and comedians. Pop stars, as you might expect, are particularly well represented—the Rolling Stones, the Spice Girls, the Pet Shop Boys, Elvis Costello, David Bowie, Suzy Quatro . . . But what is more interesting is who aren't to be found. Chaucer, Milton, Dryden, Swift, Pope, Gibbon, Coleridge, Thackeray, Hardy, Kipling, D. H. Lawrence—these are just a few of the omissions. And though I have taken my examples from literature, things aren't much rosier elsewhere. Elton John may be included, but there is no Purcell or Elgar. You look in vain for Gladstone (shall we say) or John Maynard Keynes or Henry Moore, but you can console yourself with Michael Caine (two separate cards) and Tracy Emin.

You won't, on the other hand, find Kim Philby or Anthony Blunt or Guy Burgess or Donald Maclean. But who knows? Perhaps it is only a matter of time.

A Rose is a rose . . .

by Mark Steyn

I realized the other day that I'd been avoiding seeing *Gypsy*. My main reason was that I was enjoying all the backstage turmoil at the Shubert Theatre ruthlessly recounted every morning by Michael Riedel in his *New York Post* column. Surely the show itself could only be an anticlimax. I'd have been happy for it to go on previewing forever, as the producers ordered up new sets, fired choreographers, shuffled casts, and denied rumors about how lousy the star was, etc.

It hardly seems possible to have got into such a mess with *Gypsy*. The 1959 musical biography by Jule Styne, Stephen Sondheim, and Arthur Laurents is indestructible. It's nominally about Gypsy Rose Lee, but actually about her mother, Mama Rose, the mother of all stage mothers. Just as her daughter is merely a vehicle for Mama's ambitions, so a showbiz biotuner is merely a pretext for an investigation of something dramatically much juicier, and much more universal: parents and children. And, from that first sly sleight of hand, the show pulled off any number of others. To some of us, it's the greatest of all Broadway musicals; certainly, it's the most Broadway, fusing the two strains of the American musical: the dramatic ambition of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical play set to the gloriously brassy blare of musical comedy. And in bringing together those two traditions *Gypsy* reaches moments of genuine operatic intensity that the more self-conscious "Broadway operas"—Weill, Men-

otti, Bernstein, Sondheim—rarely manage: Mama Rose is of genuinely operatic size, and her big act closers—"Ev'rything's Coming Up Roses" and "Rose's Turn"—are the Broadway equivalent of the Mad Scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

"Jule wrote kinda trashy gutter music for *Gypsy*," Arthur Laurents told me a few years back, "and I mean that as a compliment." What he's getting at, I think, is that, no matter what dramatic heft it might have, a Broadway musical still has to be in the American vernacular. The trouble was that, as the Broadway musical got more ambitious dramatically, it drifted musically into a semi-operatic twilight zone. *Gypsy* could have been the rule, instead it wound up as an exception to it, a marvelous paradox: a musical-comedy opera.

It's so skillful you don't notice how skillful it is: its chief characteristic is its flawless construction. A few years ago, I was at a theater conference in London with Ronald Lee, who was then producing a revival of *South Pacific*. "I had to straighten out the director," he explained. "He had this 'concept.' I said it's Rodgers and Hammerstein. Who the hell needs concepts?" I agree, up to a point. But the reason the West End expression "the well-made play" became a term of contempt in the London theater is that, when a drama's so well-made it can run like clockwork, that's what tends to happen: it's efficient, but it lacks sparks.

That was the general tone of the last

Broadway revival of *Gypsy* in 1989. Tyne Daly brought some interesting shading to the character of Mama Rose—bullying, but also vulnerable, and more ambiguous in her flirting. But she was still following the same template laid down by Ethel Merman in the original production. Barbra Streisand, not exactly a shrinking violet, declined a film remake of *Gypsy* because she was wary, even thirty years on, of being compared with Merman. Then, of course, there's Jerome Robbins, the original "superstager," with his ever more inflated billing—"Entire Production Conceived, Choreographed And Directed By . . ."—a vanity despised by older directors. "That's like saying," scoffed George Abbott, "Entire Part Of Mother Played By Lizzie Flop." But, decades after Robbins abandoned Broadway for the New York City Ballet, his big shows—*West Side Story*, *Gypsy*, *Fiddler on the Roof*—remain in the tight little boxes he built for them. Robbins' staging is as fixed a part of the script as any line of dialogue.

Enter Sam Mendes, the wunderkind of London's Donmar Warehouse theater, Oscar-winning director of *American Beauty*, "reinventor" of *Cabaret*, etc. When you ask Mendes to do *Gypsy*, it's because you don't want the roadshow Robbins version. For a while, there was even a name for this kind of revival: a "revisical"—a production that exhaustively "re-examines" a familiar work for a contemporary audience. The British laid down the formula for this school of production in the early Nineties: You take a director from "serious" theater—the classics, contemporary drama, opera—and you invite him to stage a "dark" version of whatever beloved musical takes your fancy. "Dark" and, ideally, also painfully "raw." "Dark" usually turns out to be measured in wattage rather than psychological depth: the stage is gloomily lit. "Raw" means there's no scenery to speak of.

You can apply this approach to almost anything: readers may recall there was a "dark" *Sound of Music* on Broadway a couple of years ago, which went to great

lengths to pretend it wasn't about nuns and barons trilling in the Alps but rather a savage indictment of Nazism. It was *Cabaret* in non-drag. Sam Mendes himself gave us a "dark" *Oliver!* a few years back at the London Palladium. And so, invited to come up with a radical re-invention of *Gypsy*, he came up with something that was radical and inventive in all the most predictable ways. There would be no scenery, on the grounds that *Gypsy* is a backstage musical and thus must be set on a bare stage.

In London, they take this process to its logical conclusion and give the star role to an unprepossessing RSC character actress who can't sing or dance. But Broadway is not yet that advanced, and so it was decided that Mendes's *Gypsy* needed a marquee name and on Broadway there's only one left: Bernadette Peters. Miss Peters is the right age for the role—fifty-five—but she looks a lot younger and, more importantly, she looks soft, the rosebud mouth straight off an old-time kewpie doll. Traditionally, Mama Rose is thought to require something a little harder, like Merman or Angela Lansbury.

So right away we have one of those awkward accommodations between commerce and art. And sure enough pretty soon there are grumblings from members of the "creative team" that Bernadette isn't up to the role, and grumblings from the preview audiences that they expect a little more for a hundred bucks than a bare stage lit by a couple of forty-watt bulbs. And so various sticks of furniture materialized, and Mendes' concept began to undergo subtle shifts until, by the time I showed up a few days after opening, it was the concept that was barely visible.

Gypsy gets going before the curtain, whipped up by Jule Styne's musical energy. Styne gave audiences the best overtures since Gershwin, and *Gypsy*'s never put a foot wrong. In 1959, when it got to the strip-joint bump'n'grind of those E-flat shrieks, the composer told the second trumpeter to blow the roof off the joint. The crowd

cheered wildly and by the time the overture ended the show was a hit. The play itself opens at Uncle Jocko's Kiddie Show in Seattle, with a stageful of freaky moppets in tatty home-made costumes. And hardly are we into "Let Me Entertain You" when a great foghorn blast of a voice from the back of the theater rasps, "Sing out, Louise!" And elbowing her way down the aisle comes Mama Rose. This is a superb opening that neatly sums up the show: by interrupting the opening number and indeed her own daughter, Mama Rose lets you know what the show's really about. In that first scene, Ethel Merman claimed the role and closed the deal.

If the star made the role, it's also the case that the role made the star, transforming a woman who had gradually slid into self-caricature into a dramatic tour-de-force. The enduring musicals of this era, the belle époque from *Oklahoma!* (1943) to *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964), are ensemble pieces. But *Gypsy* is a solid piece of drama that also requires a towering star performance. If there's no Mama Rose, there's no show. That's another irony Arthur Laurents built into the play. Rose bullies her two daughters into vaudeville—one quits, so she turns to the other; vaudeville goes belly up, so she pushes her into burlesque. And, at the end, when the bullying's worked and Louise is America's most famous striptease artiste, Rose is redundant. *Gypsy* is an odd showbiz fable because it's about all the energy this most energetic of societies can't find a use for, all the millions out there who sing or dance or play the piano or figure-skate—and nobody needs them. Laurents took one of those figures nobody needed and made her indispensable.

At the Shubert Theatre, you see this more clearly than ever before. As soon as Bernadette Peters barges on, you get not the Merman monstrosity or the psychotic Lansbury or the brisk businesslike Daly, but a dime-store starlet. The joke in previews was that Miss Peters was miscast: she should have been playing not Mama but Mama's daughter Baby June, the eternally

prepubescent mopet who insists she's "twelve going on thirteen." "How long has that been going on?" replies the producer's secretary. That's the Peters image—a fifty-five-year old ingenue: in the play, as a concession to the advancing years, Baby June is re-named Dainty June, and that's what Bernadette is—dainty. And, from the moment she walks down the aisle and her sweet, almost frail voice gives the order "Sing out, Louise!," you know this is not your father's Mama. This Mama Rose is the first in forty-four years to look convincingly like the mother of Baby June, and in a curious way the crazy ambition suddenly falls into place: Mama Rose is pretty, winsome, coquettish; she could have been Baby June if only she'd had a mama who pushed her; but no-one ever did. "I was born too soon and started too late," says Rose at the end, and the line makes sense in a way it never quite did for Merman or Lansbury. Mendes has a stylistic tic in this production: he likes to show us Rose watching June clunking around the stage, and in the course of the evening it comes to seem like a woman watching herself played by an under-rehearsed understudy.

The tonal novelty of this interpretation is immensely refreshing. When Merman's Mama Rose meets Herbie, a third-rate schlub of an agent, their "charm song," "Small World (Isn't It?)," is a con—just a tactical readjustment of Rose's perpetual hustle. When Miss Peters' Rose sings it to Herbie, it really is charming:

"We have so much in common
It's a phenomenon . . ."

"Common/Phenomen—" is a lovely rhyme over those notes, and Miss Peters gives it enough of a wistful ache to persuade you that this is a Rose naïve enough to believe the song.

Jule Styne would, I'm almost certain, have hated this performance. He disliked the way Rosalind Russell softened Rose's edges in the film version of *Gypsy*. But, just

as you're thinking Styne misunderstood the nature of his own creation, Miss Peters goes and confirms his thesis. At the end of Act One, Baby June—the talent—has run off with Tulsa, one of the gentlemen of her somewhat ragged chorus. Rose is left with the untalented one, the wallflower with barbershop hair, standing at the railroad station, with no money and no act. “Too many writers write self-pity,” Styne said to me years ago. “Audiences hate that in characters.” The maudlin ballad was not what was needed; it rarely is. So instead Styne, Sondheim, and Laurents turned the moment in on itself. Initially Rose seems dazed by the betrayal. And then she rounds on the one daughter she's got left, the mousy nondescript who sewed Baby June's costumes, and says to hell with June, *you're* going to be the star:

“I had a dream
A dream about you, baby
It's gonna come true, baby
They said we were through
But baby . . .”

And into “Ev'rything's Coming Up Roses,” a classic exuberant upbeat look-out-world-here-we-come showtune. But in the context of the play it's a woman driving off the map. It's showbiz boosterism when they play it at the Tonys, but as an Act One finale it's a declaration of madness, an epiphany, the moment when standard stage-mother pushiness transforms itself beyond reality. Poor put-upon Louise and Herbie stand mute, and their silence is eloquent.

There's really only one way to do this song and it's not the way Bernadette Peters tackles it. In concert, her habit of taking some harmless pop trifle from the Jazz Age and slowing it down to funereal tempo as if it's a bona fide art song can be mildly irritating. But that tentativeness utterly undermines “Ev'rything's Coming.” It's a song that starts off at the top of the register—“You'll . . . be . . . SWELL!”—and blasts off from there. But the insane swagger of Merman is missing. This Rose isn't trying to

convince Louise, she's trying to convince herself. The night I saw the show, Miss Peters' voice was under some considerable strain, but the underwhelming wasn't solely due to vocal exhaustion, it was the attitude underneath. It's the moment on which the entire evening hinges: everyone in the audience knows the song and everyone wants her to thwack it to the back of the balcony, but she can't quite bring herself to believe in it. And that's a terrible thing to say about Rose.

What happens in Act Two? Same thing, this time with “Rose's Turn” and this time you know it's coming. “Rose's Turn” is an amazing piece of writing from Styne and Sondheim—part recitative, part medley of jaggedly reprised fragments, the whole melding into a nervous breakdown in song that actually does break down. But even a breakdown requires the kind of old-time star assurance to pull off and Bernadette Peters can't bring herself to give it to us. She is, by most estimates, a much more rounded actress than Merman, but her Rose is forced and shallow at all the most important moments.

Miss Peters is important to the production, because what else is there? Sam Mendes was hired as a brainy Brit to give a high-toned intellectual frisson to the revival, but he doesn't seem to have an idea in his pretty little head. Whatever the original concept was—and it seems mostly to have been to have no scenery except ugly brown chairs—it doesn't survive in any coherent form. A production designed to move the show beyond Jerome Robbins winds up clinging to Robbins as a frightened child to his nurse. Certain Robbins stagings that seemed tired in 1970s bus-and-truck productions are dusted off one more time, and then clumsily effected: the strobe sequence, under cover of which Baby June and Louise advance from their child selves to their adolescent selves, is almost incompetent.

Meanwhile, whenever Mendes does attempt to interject himself into the Robbins numbers, every touch he adds is somehow

coarser and rings false. This was the chief defect of his *Cabaret*: when you start off with cutaway buttocks and rouged nipples, where do you go? *Gypsy* offers fewer opportunities for tediously familiar shocks, but Mendes's poor judgment is often in evidence. The family's big break comes when Mama Rose gets a shot at auditioning the kids for Mr. Goldstone, chief booker of the Orpheum circuit. Of course, talent can always use a helping hand. So, in "Have An Eggroll, Mister Goldstone," she attempts to ingratiate herself further by offering the great man some of her beloved Chinese food. This is a comedy song, and the sight of Rose menacingly advancing on Goldstone with her eggroll has always been funny. But it's not enough for Mendes. So he has Bernadette Peters shove the eggroll down Goldstone's throat. It's a fake bit of business—would Rose really do this to the biggest potential meal ticker in her life?—and it sacrifices the plot point to a cheap joke.

And yet, for all that, I had a good time at the Shubert and so did most other people. Why? Well, just to pluck at random, "Some People," and "All I Need Is The Girl," and "You Gotta Get A Gimmick," and "Together Wherever We Go." The goodwill generated by Styne's music will carry you a long way. Broadway depends on revivals these days, many of them, like *Gypsy*, opening just before Tony-nominating season. The new plays and musicals are thin categories now, and a theater kept alive by the back

catalogue learns to tell itself protective little lies. Obviously, we're not just reviving a surefire hit: Whaddaya think we are? Some rinky-dink dinner theater set-up for Florida retirees? No, it's a top-to-tail reinvigoration of tired and familiar material. Why, it's almost like a new show—and, if we ever get to lean on the Tony committee hard enough, one day it'll be eligible for the Best New category.

But I think the real test is this: could this production persuade you of the merits of these songs if they were all brand new? I don't believe Mendes's *Gypsy* would. There's a busyness to the backgrounds which is very distracting, most of the supporting cast are serviceable at best, and left to her own devices Miss Peters falls back on some generic hand gestures in most of her numbers. Whatever the producers may think, what audiences like is the show. They won't always acknowledge that—they may say they're only there for Bernadette Peters and they wouldn't have come for Gladys Schmoe. But the truth is whether or not they have a good time depends far more on Styne, Sondheim, and Laurents than on Bernadette. *Gypsy* would work if it was me directing and Hillary Clinton as Mama Rose. But, even with somewhat better casting, the director and his concept and a not quite comfortable star just get in the way. If the play's strong enough, as *Gypsy* is, all the most creative "creative teams" in the world can't wreck it.

Dance

Bubble Boy: Mark Morris at BAM

by Laura Jacobs

Mark Morris's arrival on the New York dance scene was spectacularly timed. George Balanchine died on April 30, 1983, leaving a company shaken, a following forlorn, and an art form facing a new era: classical dance post-Balanchine. Nine months later, on January 2, 1984, Mark Morris was born in the pages of *The New Yorker*, in a key-to-the-city review by Arlene Croce titled "Mark Morris Comes to Town." The timing was elegant, just the kind of fateful precision that served Balanchine during a long life of ups and downs, decisions and revisions. And the timing was comforting, not least because it was so Balanchinian. New York dance—stripped of its genius, its prize, its lyric lord—needed a reason to keep going. And here he was: a new genius, chewy, cherubic, with pre-Raphaelite ringlets and a dimple in his chin. Morris wasn't classical, he didn't make ballets. He was a modern dancer who drew from a variety of disciplines—folk dance, clog dance, high modern, postmodern, and, yes, classical (he performed with the Eliot Feld company for a time). And he was mightily musical in a showy way, using canon and counterpoint with amazing authority for one so young, an authority that made you think of Mr. B. Indeed, Morris forged the link himself in 1982. Without ever having seen Balanchine's *Liebeslieder Walzer*, Morris choreographed a dance to some of the same music and called it *New Love Song Waltzes*. Writing of the work in her 1984 review, Croce called it "the

piece that most of Morris's admirers love best, and the one that stunned me with its precocity." Peter Martins, once precocious too, had ascended into Balanchine's position at the top of New York City Ballet, but it was Mark Morris, a modern dancer, who was the darling of the dance press, its foundling prince. In his 1984 solo *O Rangsayee*, he even wore a diaper.

O precocity. Morris was fresh in both senses of the word. Certainly no classical choreographer would have made an attempt on Balanchine's Brahms, a piece of music Balanchine came to in 1960, when he was fifty-six and in one of his glorious full-moon phases. His *Liebeslieder Walzer* is a drawing-room romance fit into a fine gold pocket watch, its four couples in white gloves circling their interior dramas—the erotic nature of each relationship—in 3/4 time. Morris's Brahms is more like summer camp after lights out. It isn't coupled, isn't straight or gay, but instead has a hum of the polymorphous perverse, as if any coupling is possible in the bushes by the lapping of the lake. Side by side, the two Brahms dances embody very different orientations. Balanchine explores individuals, giving us eight close-ups, eight characters waltzing around their private truths. Morris creates a faceless *La Ronde*, a twilight tumescence; he cuts against the text of love with a subtext of lust, an articulation of Puck's "what fools these mortals be," only Morris, warmer, is saying, "what humans . . ." He might even

be saying, “what children . . .” Morris dancers have always had the look of barefoot kids whose big bodies have developed before they quite know what to do with them (they’re costumed like kids too, in underwear or untucked jammies or skimpy shifts or baggy tops-and-bottoms).

Where Balanchine’s musical refinement was answered with dancing of like refinement—a classical technique of purring power and containment, cat-lick finish, and emotion sensitively pitched—Morris’s musical refinement served dancing that was blunt, earthy, purposely unpedigreed: legs unstretched, feet floppy and slappy, the upper body not lifted but just plumped there, undancerly, like any office worker. This very deliberate, often coarse, mind-body contrast could work wonderfully well, as in the early *Gloria* to Vivaldi, a dance where spiritual prostration and sexual frustration knot up ecstatically. It could also look camp, which was no problem because Morris was pretty campy himself, his humor sort of Loony Tunes (batting his eyes at the audience, Morris is as faux femme as Bugs Bunny in drag). And it could look like nothing at all, as in a dance called *Behemoth*, a big, heavy, empty Merce Cunningham knock-off that just stands there with a leg dangling in the air.

In the beginning, Morris was often compared to Paul Taylor, partly because Taylor has always liked robust bodies on his dancers (except Taylor dancers look like adults, not overgrown kids), and partly because Morris, like Taylor, was making dances that focused on the group at the expense of the individual. But there’s a big distinction between the two. Taylor approaches populations, genres, as an anthropologist or scientist might, with a keen eye for their prevailing rules and postures, paces and clichés, the ingrown way of dealing with sex and dissent, whether it be a colony of insects (*Counterswarm*) or a religious congregation (*The Word*). Taylor is tough and he sees groups for what they are, not co-ops but tribes. Over and over he gives us the sacrificial

lamb/maiden in his work: the crushing of the one for the good—the tradition—of the many. Mark Morris is into softer science. He’s not an anthropologist, he’s a sociologist, or, perhaps, a social worker. In the 1990s he did a dance called *The Office*, complete with clipboard authoritarian; one by one the dancers were removed. In Morris’s work, evil tends to come from without, not grow within, and so the group is an all-embracing place, a comfy commune, a pillow. This view harkens back to Morris’s early years with the Koleda Folk Ensemble.

“All the forms of happiness that he found in Koleda—artistic, social, emotional, physical—reinforced the communal vision,” writes Joan Acocella in her 1993 biography, *Mark Morris*. “Utopianism is a constant theme of Morris’s work, and that utopianism comes from Koleda.” Morris’s utopia is a charmed circle of equality and diversity, all body types and colors, no hierarchy of beauty, no stereotyping of gender. Basically, it’s nurture versus nature, not the world as it is, but as it should be, an improvement upon it. This is not a metaphysics, it’s a form of politics. And it is unique to the Mark Morris Dance Group.

It’s important to remember that when Morris’s company arrived in New York, something else had come to town, an epidemic called AIDS. People were terrified, nervous, depressed. As the eighties pulled on, the sadness in the dance community over Balanchine’s death was joined to a greater, darker, deeper bereavement, the devastation of so many young lives lost, mostly men, many artists, with dancers and choreographers among them. Openly gay from the start, with a musical gift that seemed Balanchinian, and a fondness for Baroque music—the voice of the cathedral—Mark Morris was like a flame on the altar, a savior, a future, and it was during these years that he became a cult. Editors and critics fanned the flame, covering anything and everything he did. I fanned too. In fact, it was a curious phenomenon in which many dance writers let slip their critical distance so they might be just that:

fans. There was safety in numbers, and the elation in the theater on those big BAM nights felt almost manic; those who did not join in were killjoys. "Lead us," was the strange subconscious wavelength on the aisle. It was a huge and unfair burden to place on one artist.

Soon "us" was the Mark Morris audience, a clan that watches in high appreciation, brooks no criticism, and *gets* the Bloomsbury–Barthes–No Exit–Romper Room wit, or rather, wink. Susan Sontag is its god-mother; Sharon Delano its consigliere; *Threepenny Review*, the family paper; Isaac Mizrahi, its burbling bon vivant. It's an audience politically in tune with the whole utopia ethic, pleased with itself for being so in tune, ready to be pleased still more by whatever should happen onstage, surprisingly anti-analytical for a New York audience (despite Sontag, or maybe because of her), and always ready to laugh—I mean at anything. For some reason Twyla Tharp can twitch 'til she's blue in the face and no one finds it particularly funny. But if Mark Morris flips his hand spastically, as he did at predictable intervals in the recent dance *Foursome*, the audience guffaws. Every time. You can feel them ready and waiting, gathering for the next guffaw. In "The Latest Rage," a dead-on deconstruction of Morris's audience that ran in *Ballet Review*, Summer 2001, Michael Porter notes the "distinctive air of aggressive-passivity" and the "too facile embrace." Take that spastic hand flip. One sees that it doesn't relate to the music, doesn't correspond to a musical spasm. So it must be funny, because if it isn't funny then it's just . . . meaningless? A whim? Well, that's funny too: The Absurd. This audience invests heavily in these dances. As Porter reports in *Ballet Review*: "In the new illustrated monograph *Mark Morris's L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration*, the commentators on this particular work do not restrain their honorific comparisons. Among the artwork and artists invoked are Persian carpets, Beethoven's *Fifth*, *Ulysses*, Keats, Dante, Attic sculpture, Botticelli, Wagner's Ring

Cycle, *The Four Temperaments*, Pasternak, Pushkin, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Here empathy turns riot." In sixty-three years of dance-making Balanchine never knew such empathy.

So it's nineteen years now since Mark Morris "came to town," nineteen years of prolific dance-making, partnership with Baryshnikov in the White Oak Project, work with ballet and opera companies, and the building of his own school in Brooklyn. In short, Mark Morris is a brand and a business. But what about the dances?

I became disenchanted with Mark Morris in the 1990s. I tired of a gender neutrality that yet left women with the short end of the stick, mainly because the dances showed so little interest in *la femme* (these girls are kind of like Anybodys in *West Side Story*, heartfelt tomboys). And Morris's gift for metaphor began to seem played out, or perhaps abandoned, as if he was no longer interested in his most fundamental poetic device. Metaphor, after all, is artifice. It was increasingly clear that Morris's early work was his best work, and it never got better than *Dido and Aeneas*. Fascinating too, because *Dido* is the one big piece in which he plundered his hippie-dip utopia—in this case, Dido's kingdom—and did it with the *joie de vivre* of Don Giovanni adding another dumb broad to his list. It was a work in which Morris's dancers looked like adults—ironic, actually, considering Purcell wrote the opera for a girls' school performance—and in which Morris's sensitivity to Baroque music, his folk shapes and sturdy spatial constructions, not to mention his full-bodied aptitude for drag, all these talents dovetailed neatly to make an airtight expression: a work, a world, that contained its own seas and bed chambers and wind-snapped sails and gravity. It was a Greek myth built in one of Bruegel's beer bottles. Even Morris's use of mime, so often kindergarten simple, took flight as if against burnt-brown skies.

Dido and Aeneas was premiered in 1989,

four months after *L'Allegro, Il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, the dance Morris's fans acclaim as his masterpiece. I suppose it comes down to cups of tea. To me, *L'Allegro* is another Morris dance that looks like it was made at summer camp on the Great Lawn. (Made at Jacob's Pillow would be better.) It has good things in it—some tight little pantomime sequences, very filigree—but so much of the rest is flat and runny pastel, like over-diluted watercolors being tilted on a board. Coy (I can't forget the circle of boys smacking each other's fannies), its garlanded gambols and euphoric running in rows become oppressively repetitive. If this is utopia, forget it. Maybe even Morris was sick of the softness; *Dido* seems to be made with wood beams and whalebone. Still, I agree that there's more invention in *L'Allegro* than in anything Morris is making today.

Most of what I've seen of Morris's choreography in recent years has been work outside his company. It isn't cheering. His stagings for opera often lack coherence. And his dances for ballet companies have been openly contemptuous of classical ambitions. Are ballet directors so hard-up for choreographers, or just totally clueless? In *A Garden*, premiered by the San Francisco Ballet in 2001, Morris holds the dancers to the ground as if pinning down the corners of a canvas tent. He allows them insipid leitmotifs that have no metaphorical spin or even juice and instead just leave you scratching your head: That spindly tendu with arms hovering waist level, stiff like a Barbie doll—why do we keep getting that pose? He shaves away hierarchy as if it were a wart. It's not only painful to see a willow like Muriel Maffre attempting to blend with the daisies in the corps, it's perverse. *Sandpaper Ballet*, worse still. Let's sand down the dancers, sand down distinctions. Everyone's dressed in green unitards, the grade-school green of molding clay, and in drill formations they prance and wag rump *en masse* to the kitsch music of Leroy Anderson—Gumby does the Conga—all the while smiling like fools.

Morris's *Gong*, premiered at ABT in 2001, is utterly baffling, a piece of chinoiserie for the corner cabinet, a better showcase for Mizrahi's costumes—tutus stiff as ceramics, and tights with gold Hindu cuffs—than for dancers. They comes out in rows and rows and rows, Morris's favorite spatial strategy these days, and take turns hitting the same pose, one of those acutely mute positions Morris now specializes in, and that's the ballet. The only real dancing is in Michael Chybowski's lighting—séance-like glimmers, the feel of things stealing in the night. In a way, Morris's performance on the PBS documentary *Born to be Wild: The Leading Men of American Ballet Theatre* says it all. He clowns around. He doesn't act like a serious choreographer, but like a kid, and he doesn't choreograph like a serious choreographer either. The piece he made for these four *premiers danseurs* was bitsy busy-work that said nothing about any of them, and didn't say much about Robert Schumann's music. It turns out that this little dance became "choreographic material" for the final movement of a larger dance, *V*, which makes you wonder if it ever had anything to do with ABT's men—and how deeply, for that matter, it has to do with *V*. Mark Morris, beloved for his endless invention, plopping a *pièce d'occasion* for ABT into a company work for his own dancers. How very communal.

I caught up with *V*—premiered in 2001 and pinned with critical corsages—at BAM last March. It was the last dance on a program that left me, one dance after another, acutely mute. Where to begin? With the audience I guess, that same creepy tone of self-congratulation. Hey everybody, group hug!

The first dance, *Resurrection*, got reviews invoking film noir, murder mysteries, and Balanchine's Broadway ballet *Slaughter on Tenth Avenue* (both dances use the same music by Richard Rodgers). There is a couple, a backdrop with stars, and hands miming gun shots. But you have to imagine a *noir* wash over a sixties slumber party that's set, say, in a game-show studio.

The dancers wear black-and-white pajamas in Op Art patterns (harlequins, squares, stripes, etc.); knowing toothpaste smiles are plastered on their faces; and then they're on the floor doing clumsy Busby Berkeley. A love story with no love, a murder with no death, it's a dream ballet with no dream, a Mark Morris so-what send-up.

Something Lies Beyond the Scene. If you would like to play skittles with Edith Sitwell, this one's for you. The music is William Walton's *Façade: An Entertainment with Poems by Edith Sitwell* (Sir Frederick Ashton choreographed the orchestral suite in 1931), and in this dance arch meets antic. See the boys and girls rushing about in T-shirts that sport cutesy symbols: duck, fish, suitcase, ear, cross, bird, boot, etc. Sitwell's verse (read by Morris and friends in the pit), grotesque and tongue-twisty, but every now and then sliding for seconds into grace, is mostly pretentious and unpleasurable, and so is the dance that goes with it. It's like an obscure semiotic scavenger hunt—the T-shirts, the Sitwell, the chesty air of understanding among the dancers—but what that semiotic something might be “lies beyond the scene.”

Foursome. Four guys; Erik Satie; Judson Churchy; that spastic hand twitch. At this point I started wondering what people fifty years from now would make of these dances, the peculiar blend of humble pie and highfalutin'. Will they see the affectless tone, arbitrary gestures, emotional void as wit?

V is set to Robert Schumann's Quintet in E flat for piano and strings, Op. 44, a rather narrow and repetitive score. Morris answers that score with his watercolor formations, loose lines, kaleidoscopic, and he can still be good with canon. *V* is in the vein of *Gloria* and *L'Allegro*, but it doesn't have a vocal text to swing on, and no gestures that catch and grow. The slow movement has dancers crawling across the stage like creatures pulling heavy loads—man as beast of burden—and it's another rough opposition. Yet Morris has done this so many times before. The dance goes on, the vision thins, run-

ning out long before the music is over. How weak Morris has become. Way back when, his work was defined by what it was: musically communicative, metaphorically alive. Now it feels like the sum of what it isn't, all those house rules against aesthetic conventions, cultural expectations, dance “lies” (his word) Morris won't tell. Funny how omissions have a way of growing into lies (never truths). So much effort to empty out, yet nothing much put back in. Morris could do a dance called *O*.

Two weeks before Morris's engagement at BAM, Paul Taylor's company performed at City Center. I won't go into the volcanic brilliance of *Last Look*, a dance from 1985 about humanity's last minutes on earth, a Spielbergian skyride though the final inferno, Taylor's dancers proving you don't need digital technology to show rolling backdrafts and gleaming meltdowns when you have a technique of such sandblast power and polish, and Michael Trusnovec the last man to see his face in a mirror, devolving before our eyes, Narcissus in Hell, a performance that was an assault on Patrick Corbin's alpha-stature within the company, and the dance a smoldering assault on euphemisms like “collateral damage,” not because Taylor made it that way, but because that's what art does, it speaks without being spoken to.

I won't go into Taylor's premiere *Dream Girls*, set to barbershop quartet songs, a piece so un-p.c. in so many directions it almost seems to be tweaking earnest downtown dance, but spinning out with such complete mastery of turn-of-the-century vernacular—high vaudeville and low burlesque—it's bliss.

I only want to mention one moment in the other premiere, a dance that could have been called “*V*” for the way it begins in *V* formation and continually returns to that *V*—but is titled *Promethean Fire*—a dance that looks like the inside of Radio City Music Hall, curve-on-curve Art Deco reverberation, and the outside of the Chrysler Building, aspiration piercing the sky; the

dancers one minute heavy as chunks of marble, the next blizzarding into a fugue state (the music is Bach's Toccata and Fugue in D Minor), and Taylor playing fast and loose with heavy and light, sculpted and blurred, order and chaos, life and death and life. Patrick Corbin and Lisa Viola are the lead couple and in the middle of the dance they perform a leap and catch unlike any I've ever seen. It's the size, the scale, of something pair skaters do, the man tossing the woman up into the air and she spinning and landing a good ten feet away on one blade, only here it is done in reverse. Viola runs toward Corbin, throws herself into a jeté en tournant of such flying height the entire audience lifts with her, then lands low in Corbin's arms in a sweeping stag position, her leg folded neatly. The exhilaration of it; the arc and turn in the air; the swaying kiss of the catch; the bravery of them both; the audience's answering gasp of pleasure; and the dance completed in a flash, a flight, its themes of reach, fear, and faith caught up, written on air as only dance can do—there was more generosity, more lived

life, in that double dare than in all four of those Mark Morris dances. And there was happiness in the theater.

Happiness—artistic, social, emotional, physical—is palpably absent from Morris's recent work. Sadness is missing too. In truth, there's no real emotion. Does Morris derive pleasure making these dances? One doesn't see it. Add up all the arch absurdities, patty-cake postures, formalities dumbed-down, genres camped-up, nonsense pretending to insight, Pepsodent grins patronizing the music, and you have a choreographic realm that is completely artificial, a hybrid of the very artifice Morris originally sought to avoid. Only a self-congratulatory audience could enjoy this stuff, as it's the only audience that won't see what isn't there. Those who all these years have supported Morris with unconditional love—extravagant praise for middling effort, qualified praise for bad work—have hurt him. The boy's in a bubble. It's time for Mark Morris to bounce out of his sterile utopia and get some damned life back into his dances.

Editor's note: Readers are reminded that *The New Criterion* does not publish during July or August. Our next issue will appear in September. Readers are invited to visit *The New Criterion's* web page at www.newcriterion.com, where we plan to post new material from time to time this summer.

Art

Anywhere in between

by Karen Wilkin

In the seventies, when I was a fledgling curator, any gathering of artists inevitably led to at least one acrimonious exchange about the exhaustion and imminent demise of figurative painting. At some point during these years, perhaps spurred by those discussions, a large, multi-gallery exhibition was organized to survey the current state of representational art. In spite of a selection that seemed determined more by a desire for quantity than quality, the show easily proved that news of the death of figuration, like that of Mark Twain, had been greatly exaggerated. You'd think that would have settled the question, but opinions on both sides remained entrenched and the arguments continued. Somewhere along the line, however, the emphasis shifted. Over the next decade or so, with the rise of post-modernism and its requirement that art tell stories and convey explicit political, sociological, or autobiographical messages, debates on the vitality and even the necessity of figuration were replaced by inquiries into the health and viability of abstraction. The issue was complicated by the fact that abstraction was somehow equated with formalism, paternalism, and, by extension, Clement Greenberg, so, both before and after the cantankerous critic's death, discussions of the significance and importance of abstract art in aesthetic terms were often confused with recitals of old resentments and hurts. (Few people seemed to remember, or care, that Greenberg frequently said

that if he'd had his "druthers," the best art of his time would have been figurative, "but it didn't turn out that way.")

More recently, as younger artists have become increasingly fascinated with what art schools used to call "alternative media"—which now look more and more mainstream, but that's another matter—the conversation often centers on the survival of painting itself. For present-day artists who continue to paint seriously and ambitiously—and there are still many—the difference between figuration and abstraction can seem less important than the characteristics of the medium itself. Working abstractly, these days, does not exclude the possibility of reference; discussions often revolve around the implications of degrees of allusiveness, rather than, as they once did, about polarities of approach. What seems more in question are the physical characteristics of the medium. An alarming number of younger practitioners who still apply paint to flat supports of some kind (that's not a stilted circumlocution, but an effort to be faithful to the evidence) seems either to be oblivious to the particular properties of their materials or to mistrust them; often their work looks as if they would prefer to make photographs, if only they could figure out a way to make the images they desire, abstract or otherwise, by using a camera. You frequently wonder why they don't explore the possibilities of photography, as many other inventive present-day practitioners do,

often at a scale that equals or surpasses anything painters produce. Perhaps the indifference of these younger painters to their materials is the key, since the best of the photographers are acutely attuned to the specifics of their chosen medium, exploiting its ability to capture enormous amounts of ephemeral optical information, without ignoring its formal capabilities, its tonal range, or, despite photography's seeming fidelity to appearances, its ability to mislead or deceive.

The paintings of the photographer-wannabes sometimes bear a superficial resemblance to the deadpan transcriptions of photo-based images into deliberately uninflected paint of—say—Gerhard Richter, but I think the motivation is different. Richter's bland, sleek surfaces are said to be signs of his quest for anonymity and indications of his doubt about the entire enterprise of making pictures “by hand.” I suspect, though, that rather than musing on the nature of their discipline, young artists who use paint without enthusiasm are simply demonstrating the effects of a lifetime's exposure to disembodied mass-media images, television, and film, and a childhood of handling nothing but plastic. An intelligent artist-critic friend, in his early forties, thinks that the thin, expedient appearance of the work of so many young artists results simply from their “not wanting to spend too much time on it.” This could be related to Hans Hofmann's famous dictum that “a picture must be finished in one sweep,” but I'm willing to bet that it isn't. (Greenberg, who learned a lot from Hofmann, often advised young painters with a tendency to overload their work to stop after an hour and “let it cook”—that is, not look at the result for couple of days in order to shake free of established habits.)

Happily, there are still mature, thoughtful painters of various persuasions whose work bears eloquent witness to the fact that time-honored, traditional media can still be used to potent effect, as several outstanding exhibitions of the past season made clear: a survey of Thomas Nozkowski's drawings and works on paper at the New York Studio

School Gallery; shows of recent canvases by Pat Lipsky simultaneously at Elizabeth Harris Gallery and L.I.C.K., and exhibitions by John Walker and Helen Frankenthaler sequentially at Knoedler and Company.¹ It's difficult to imagine a more diverse list, in terms of formation, conviction, intention, reputation, or acquaintance. (For the record, Nozkowski, Lipsky, and Walker were all born just before the beginning or just before the end of World War II; Frankenthaler is slightly more than a decade older.) Their approaches range from unequivocal abstractness to variable allusiveness. What unites the four is their whole-hearted trust in the discipline of painting and its materials, and their belief that art that addresses the eye, without irony, explication, or modish subtext, also addresses the intellect and the emotions. What unites them, too, is that their art both demands and rewards serious attention. More time devoted to looking at the work of these four artists reveals more subtlety, more pictorial intelligence, more unexpected associations. That it should be necessary to point this out is an indication of just how thoroughly Duchampian suspicion of what he called “optical” art has permeated current aesthetic values. That all four exhibitions were enthusiastically received is, perhaps, an indication that other notions are asserting themselves. It's probably too soon to tell, but it may be cool, once again, to mean what you say or do. Certainly, these four painters do.

Thomas Nozkowski's enigmatic, intimate abstract pictures have near-cult status among those who care about painting. A shared liking for his modest-size canvases, with their delicate surfaces, odd palette, and ambiguous

1 “Thomas Nozkowski Drawings” was on view at the New York Studio School Gallery from January 23 to March 1, 2003. “Pat Lipsky” was on view at Elizabeth Harris Gallery from March 13 to April 12 and at L.I.C.K. Ltd. Fine Art from March 21 to April 17, 2003. “John Walker: Changing Light” and “Frankenthaler: New Paintings” were on view at Knoedler and Company from March 13 to April 26, and May 1 to July 18, 2003, respectively.

shapes, cuts across generations and, among artists of my acquaintance, apparently cuts across opposing aesthetic positions. Nozkowski's pictures satisfy because of their intelligence and inventiveness, but they also tantalize because they tease our perceptions, like half-remembered dream fragments. His evocative, elusive images remind you of something, but resolve themselves, as you watch, into wordless confrontations of paint, stroke, line, and color, without losing their associative powers. Since Nozkowski says that his imagery is provoked by things he "read or said or did or saw," and since some of those things seem to have been deliberately chosen because of their improbable relationship to anything visual, the inherent strangeness of these works is not surprising. (One series, Nozkowski says, had its genesis when he found several years' worth of the *Journal of Architectural Historians* at a library sale in upstate New York and "decided to do one drawing for every article.")

The drawings at the Studio School, which spanned nearly three decades, revealed both Nozkowski's single-mindedness and the gradual evolution of his personal cast of characters from essentially diagrammatic, relatively crisp floating shapes to a series of notably various, unnameable configurations. These quirky protagonists, some woolly, some spiky, some amoeba-like, some like lumpy starfish, and more, include the moody and the cheerfully cartoon-like. Mostly, (vaguely) organic, they are only occasionally geometric, but are frequently enmeshed in geometric grids or rows of parallel lines. Or they shatter the grid, leaving disconnected tatters. Or they float in pools of color or tone. On paper, Nozkowski deploys a large arsenal of materials—ink, gouache, colored pencil, graphite—now puddling, now brushing roughly, now furiously hatching, now layering elements, now carefully separating them. This fluent vocabulary of surfaces and touches reinforces the shifting associative power of the shapes themselves and may, perhaps, even generate some of the images; the irregular "left-over" zone between wildly different concentric bands, the inner a

warped star and the outer like a necklace of fat beads, for example, appears to have spawned the "figures" of subsequent works. Whether this is true or not, such specific connections, like the larger familial resemblances between works, persuade us that Nozkowski's paper works allow us a glimpse into the evolution of his world—not that it makes his pictures easier to interpret or less demanding. In the end, his works in any medium remain resolutely abstract, but charged, like stills from some ravishingly photographed but impenetrable *film noir*. Nozkowski's mysterious narratives are both beautiful and unsettling.

Pat Lipsky's recent paintings initially appear to spring from motives quite different from Nozkowski's. At first acquaintance, they seem to be primarily about themselves and the history of their evolution, and only coincidentally about how economical, surprising combinations of hue and tone can engage your emotions. There appears to be no subtext. Everything seems revealed. Stacks of generously scaled, rectangular blocks are arrayed across the canvas like the columns of a classical façade. But this deceptively simple structure is animated, even disturbed, by thoughtfully calculated variations of color and tone. Individual blocks prove to be delicately inflected by repeated touches and superimposed layering. Symmetry gives way to syncopations of chroma and near-blacks, while oppositions of saturated hues and luminous pastels set up a kind of polyphony. "Escapes" of other kinds of color between the blocks (either vestiges of earlier states or imposed, assertive lines), sound still other notes, which are intensified by the runs and drifts of the paintings' revealed edges.

Before going any further, I should state that I am not an impartial witness here, since I wrote the Harris Gallery catalogue text. But my having contributed to Lipsky's catalogue does not change the fact that her work assumes that abstract painting matters and that contemplating considered intervals, shapes, placements, colors, and sur-

faces—like listening to harmonically complex music—can be nourishing and stimulating. For those of us who share this assumption and are willing to put some effort into looking, Lipsky's recent pictures become more and more interesting over time. The differences between apparently similar reds or a gamut of closely related blues intensify; "blacks" turn into nameless warm and cool darks, and fragile, sugary pinks and tender blues reveal themselves as both varied and slightly more acidic than they once seemed. Small irregularities that announce the presence of the hand begin to assert themselves. How deeply coloristically or tonally related (or opposed) blocks penetrate becomes enormously important; so does where and how they touch.

These are wholly non-allusive pictures, with no vestiges of depiction or symbolism, entirely self-sufficient, implicitly disdainful of explication or of artist's statements. Yet in this instance, knowing more about the artist can affect our reading of her work. Lipsky has spent a good deal of time in France in recent years, closely studying medieval stained glass, and knowing this can make us look at her paintings in new ways, especially when we discover that the result of that study is a series of figurative works on paper based on specific stained glass images. (Some of these were hung at Elizabeth Harris, in a back room.) Yet even these prove to be the work of an unrepentant abstract painter. As she tells it, Lipsky was first attracted to the windows because their color and luminosity reminded her of the Fauvist painting and the American color-based, post-war abstraction that she sees as her heritage. Only much later, after she had been drawing the windows and using her annotated drawings and recollections of their color as the basis of paintings on paper in the studio, did she become interested in iconography. Knowing this, it's tempting to seek echoes of her experience of the startling blue and red lancet windows of Chartres—say—with their silhouetted leading, in her contrast of off-black and full-bore blue in one recent painting or in the superheated

scarlet and warm darks of another. Undoubtedly, those echoes are there. But so is a lifetime's accumulated experience of all kinds, including experience of looking at many other works of art. That, of course, is what all art worth taking seriously, whether abstract, figurative, or somewhere in-between, is supposed to address—or at least it was, until politics and cynicism began to take precedence.

The English-born John Walker, like Nozkowski, is a kind of cult figure, a painter's painter with a following of loyal students and admiring colleagues. For years he has tested the limits of abstraction in complex, richly inflected pictures that explore the associative possibilities of a changing cast of arcane images, some vaguely tribal, some perhaps archaic, others weirdly anthropomorphic—and so on. About four years ago, Walker began to allow more or less explicit but brutal landscape references into his pictures—specifically to the ragged tidal zones between sea and land, the mudflats and rocky shore of Maine, where he has spent extensive periods over the past thirty years—using these deliberately unpicturesque points of departure with the same freedom and inventiveness that he did repeated "vessel" and "shield" shapes, some years ago, and, more recently, a symbolic sheep's skull. The paintings in his spring exhibition, "Changing Light," invoked what is described as "a muddy cove with a tidal pool." I suppose a more accurate way to describe these compelling canvases would be to say that Walker invents equivalents in paint for the light, textures, space, mood, and possibly even smell of the seacoast, without ever ceasing to think that a picture is (to paraphrase Maurice Denis) an autonomous, flat object covered with viscous stuff.

In Walker's most recent pictures, crusted surfaces, ferocious brushstrokes, drips, spatters, and emphatic drawing focus your attention on the two-dimensional expanse of the canvas, while hovering discs, scribbled boat shapes, and assertive horizon lines play on your awareness of a particular, but am-

biguous, landscape, without describing it literally. Aggressive floating circles read as the marks left by the clam diggers. Diagonal slashes conjure up reflected moonlight. Staccato strokes become ripples or the corrugated surfaces left by the retreating tide. These multivalent associations are vivid, but you are equally absorbed by the material presence of Walker's pictures, fascinated by the subtleties of his nocturnal palette with its abrasive grays, browns, and ochres, or by the way he uses small notes of blue to clarify incipient murk. (Similarly, you can become perplexed by the way a relentless cadmium red can flatten a picture into inertness.) You become absorbed by the way space shifts from implacable flatness to a suggestion of the enterable and back again.

It's difficult to pin down just how these pictures function or just why their double reading of insistent surface and unstable illusion should be so potent. It may have something to do with the ample scale of Walker's gestures. Each mark reads as itself—an energetic record of the artist's presence and not a description of anything else, no matter how powerfully it may suggest other phenomena. One of the most surprising pictures in "Constant Light" was *Clammers' Marks I*, a palimpsest of giant scrawls, dashes, and dots, with everything, including patches of brilliant, but transparent ultramarine, shoved back into some equivocal space by an overlay of rough black-brown discs, Velázquez-like in their velvety opaqueness. The layered drawing was reminiscent of an earlier series of calligraphic pictures that incorporated poems, but the density and instability was new. I'm still not at all sure why this peculiar, uningratiating painting is as good as it is. I suppose the most economical way to describe it would be to say that it, like the rest of Walker's best recent pictures, while looking only like itself, also suggests what a combination of Marsden Hartley and Albert Ryder might be painting if he were an abstract painter working in the first part of the twenty-first century.

One of the first to walk the tightrope between improvisatory abstractness and resonant allusion was, of course, the very young Helen Frankenthaler, improbably enough a little more than half a century ago. As just about everyone knows, her famous painting *Mountains and Sea* (1952), announced new material possibilities for abstraction with its transparent, luminous stains of color and its sweeps of generous drawing—possibilities that were soon assimilated and inventively redeployed by colleagues older than she was. What these artists, good as they were, didn't—or perhaps couldn't—pick up on were the other, more idiosyncratic implications of Frankenthaler's work: her way of distilling perceived actuality into apparently spontaneous, unpremeditated pools and touches of color and her willingness to permit, perhaps even to encourage, unexpected associative images to emerge from her manipulation of materials, as though she were allowing dream images or remembered associations briefly to consolidate before they subsided once again into "pure" painting. Throughout her long and distinguished career, Frankenthaler's work has swung between these extremes of poetic, nonspecific evocation and meditation on the fact of painting itself, between alert response to the way paint behaves and the imposition of a strong will. In her most recent show—her first to include canvases, as well as monumental works on paper, for some years—these oppositions have fused, with impressive effect.

For several decades, Frankenthaler has lived and worked near Long Island Sound, and the changing light and shifting atmospheric effects of that strip of water, with its extended horizontal punctuation of Long Island itself, have suffused her pictorial lexicon. When she painted *Mountains and Sea*, she had just returned from a trip to Canada, where she had been painting watercolors from nature; "the landscape was in my arms," she later said—which helps to explain the uncanny *presence* of the picture's exuberant loops, puddles, and whorls. A

similar, almost subliminal, sense of particularity informs her recent work; landscape allusions pulse in and out, like reverberations of deeply felt perceptions.

Yet in contrast to the richly chromatic pictures that established and maintained her reputation over five decades, many of Frankenthaler's newest paintings explore what she has called her "darker palette," as she terms her on-going preoccupation with "non-colors"—unnameable black-browns, off-purples, shimmering grays, and more, all mixed by the artist out of more brilliant colors in order to retain vibrancy, while tempering heat. As a result, the recent paintings are no less luminous and intense, no less unexpected, in terms of hue, than you would expect of this master of color, but, with some exceptions, they are dark, mysterious, and operatic—Romantic, perhaps, rather than Classical or Rococo, with complex harmonies that seem both inevitable and surprising. And they are all pared down to essentials, as though Frankenthaler were testing how much she could eliminate and still end up with a picture that couldn't be ignored.

No single description is adequate, nor is any single reading. Frankenthaler often talks about her perceptions of weather and light across the water, as seen from her Connecticut home, in relation to her paintings, but it is plain that she discovers such affinities in the course of working, rather than setting to work with the intention of recapitulating those experiences. If a few iconic pictures in her recent exhibition evoke the big divisions of earth, sky, and water with broad zones of subtly inflected chroma and a few emphatic horizontal strokes, they also announce themselves as demonstrations of how exquisitely adjusted sheets of color and superimposed bars can insist on—and keep—your complete attention. And if Frankenthaler's resonant abstractions play on our experience of places, times of day, and weather, they also test our knowledge of the history of art. A radiant rose-pink canvas that shifts through mauve to lowering pew-

ter gray is at once like an abstracted version of Manet's *Woman with a Parrot*, and a powerful invocation of rain at sunset—without abdicating any of its impact simply as a non-specific surface of ravishing paint. *Warming Trend*, a miraculous blue painting that moves seamlessly, but with constant variations in density, from clear cobalt to near-purple, carries a multiple load of associations: Matisse's saturated blue backgrounds of the Teens, brilliant skies, Monet's waterlilies, and more. Mostly, however, it is about Frankenthaler's acute visual intelligence, about her faultless placement of a flick of dull brick red, a hint of green, the touch of a finger tip—which is not to deny the pleasure of the picture's associative powers. The rest of the works in the exhibition could be described in similarly ambiguous terms. Cumulatively, they are evidence that Frankenthaler is painting with undiminished strength, that if the landscapes are still "in her arms," there are five decades of making, looking at, and thinking about art in there as well, and it shows, in these uninhibited paintings.

Some years ago, at one of those artists' gatherings that turned into an argument, I listened to a group of young sculptors passionately declare their surprisingly rigid ideas about what sculpture could or could not be. Things became more and more heated until the senior member of the group, the British sculptor Anthony Caro, announced: "The pendulum can be all the way over here (pointing to his extreme left) or all the way over *here* (pointing right) or anywhere in between." The argument stopped. Just how right Caro was is increasingly visible, at least in the hands of some dedicated, whole-hearted, non-cynical artists. What is also increasingly visible is how inadequate the usual categories are, in light of the new blurring of conventional distinctions between abstractness and figuration, reference and reticence. Art, of course, gets along just fine without criticism, but critics ought to keep up. Perhaps a new vocabulary is needed.

Gallery chronicle

by James Panero

Summertime means sculpture time, and what better place to start than with the sculpture of Joel Shapiro. With each passing year, and with each successful show, this artist edges towards greatness. The last time I saw Shapiro it was his colorful stick-figure bronzes dancing in the summer sun on the roof garden at the Metropolitan Museum. That was 2001. Now inside the (glorious) exhibition space at PaceWildenstein in Chelsea, Shapiro's latest work looks more confident, at ease, and—simply put—better than ever.¹

Shapiro is one of those rare artists on the contemporary scene: he can navigate the current art market and find both formal and professional success. For a sculptor who emerged during the doldrums of the 1970s, Shapiro wisely borrowed the spartan “primary structures” of minimalism and the Earth-First aesthetic of post-minimalism (his medium is wood, or bronze castings of wood). He maintains the sensibility of his times, including an acute awareness of scale. Yet he wrestles sculpture away from the obstreperousness and soullessness of minimalism to create work with spirit, joy, and internal animation. Once more, sculpture gives as much as it receives.

¹ “Joel Shapiro: Recent Sculpture” opened at PaceWildenstein, New York, on May 2 and remains on view until July 31, 2003. A catalogue with an essay by Arthur C. Danto has been published by PaceWildenstein.

Of the five major pieces at PaceWildenstein, size can vary from thirteen inches to a massive twenty feet. Each piece works on its own devices and yet complements the next. The largest sculpture, *Untitled* (they're all called *Untitled*), knocks into the wooden roofbeams of the gallery ceiling as though communing with a long-lost friend. Mill-cut eight-by-eights, cast in bronze and finished down to a woody hue, extend up like the arms of a swing. Shapiro often tests our reading of shape by positioning his sculpture somewhere between biomorphism and pure abstraction, and nowhere is this done better than here. This sculpture radiates human excitement without, necessarily, resembling recognizable form. Scale is a factor, but unlike the works of minimalism, it is not the *only* factor.

The achievement of this large work is only bettered, in my opinion, by a couple of mid-size pieces in smoothly finished raw wood. Here are the show's biggest surprises: squared-off shapes tumble out in a wave over the gallery floor and stretch up to the skylights, supported in parts by brass fittings and slender armatures. The *hollowness* of each individual object communicates—is it possible?—an almost musical quality, a timpanic “rhythm of the cubes,” as it were. *Plink plunk plunk*. The sculptures of Joel Shapiro are a full-sensory experience. What a pleasure it is to find an artist working with form that *expresses*, rather than *depresses*, the experience of living.

It speaks to the order of the universe that as certain art stars rise, others make their slow descent. In the world of sculpture, this may be truest for Frank Stella.

We barely need reminding that in 1959, at the age of twenty-three (and fresh from Princeton! and best friends with Michael Fried! and he would marry Barbara Rose! and his father was a gynecologist!), Frank Stella made big with his "Black Paintings," the "what you see is what you see" chalk-striped canvases that ushered art into the minimalist and—more significantly—conceptualist era.

If this was the undoing of painting, Stella more recently has labored at the undoing of Stella. In the 1980s, much like Norman Mailer, Stella believed he found inspiration in urban graffiti "art." His subsequent sculptures became the "Black Paintings" in reverse. No one could have accused Stella's early work of appearing belletristic had not there been this later sculpture: cumulonimbi of exhaust manifolds, goopy paint, and booksmart titles with all the sexiness of an aging comp-lit grad student at mixer night. The result left people underwhelmed and longing for the earlier material. Naturally, Stella has kept up this manner of artistic production for what's going on two decades.

To the critical establishment, Frank Stella has lost it completely. He has become "frankly awful." He is "highly rebarbative." His work is "staggeringly hideous." He is "bulky and obstreperous." He is making "the ugliest art it is possible to make today." He "looks as if he does not own a comb." His studio is now "littered with, among other things, fishing gear, mounds of books and countless packets of Chinese duck sauce." He is "currently embroiled in a highly public and rancorous feud with the leadership of the Museum of Modern Art." These quotes come from the press kit of Stella's latest show at Paul Kasmin Gallery in Chelsea.² And those are the positive reviews.

Frank Stella has something of a martyr complex: He's under assault; he wants you

to feel his hurt; he's Van Gogh with the ear thing; his sculpture is the ear. The work now at Paul Kasmin follows a line he took at the gallery a year and a half ago in his infamous "garage show," an exhibition that still rankles, well, everyone. His sculptures at that time resembled colossal macaroni on beds of aluminum foil. It may be the case that the latest work is, indeed, *worse*: yards of unpainted auto-exhaust pipe coiled around aluminum latticework, around saber-toothed bits of sheet metal, around something resembling a Paul Henningsen "artichoke" lamp, all marked up with assembly-line permanent pen, attached with regular hardware fittings, and suspended from the gallery ceiling. Always the bookworm, the titles of these pieces—"kandam-pat," "gegantoesan"—come from Balinese words and phrases as quoted in the "1942 photographic essay *Balinese Character* by anthropologists Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead." What more need be said? Rubberneckers should not miss the car wreck currently on view at Tenth Avenue and Twenty-seventh Street. Frank Stella would not have it any other way.

Indeed, the crack-up of Frank Stella has become the art world's spectator sport—and no more so than for Frank Stella himself. For years, it seems, he has set the stage for his own demise. This is not to suggest that his recent work has been, somehow, brilliantly ironic. "Post-critical" might be a better term. Or maybe plain "bad." That's not the point.

From his press materials, we learn that Stella keeps a heavily underlined edition of *Moby-Dick* at his West Village studio. He reads Heinrich von Kleist. Might we additionally include "Also Sprach Zarathustra" on the list? Stella is a literary romantic. He has built his own *Pequot*, and he's cruising for a whale: *Oh, Ahab, Ahab, lo, they work. Steady! helmsman, steady. Nay, nay! Up helm again! He turns to meet us!* This whale, of course, is of Stella's own design.

² "Frank Stella: Recent Work" opened at Paul Kasmin Gallery, New York, on May 8 and remains on view until June 18, 2003.

The human sculptures of George Segal—and they are *human*; plaster, gauze, and bronze cast from the forms of real people—have always struck me as a little too folksy, a little too urban, a little too stuck in the low-art idiom. Most of the work now on view at Mitchell-Innes & Nash we have seen time and time before.³ Yet his style hold up surprisingly well, it communicates its own craftsmanship, and with the current show it takes on some new poignancy: this is the first solo exhibition of Segal's since his death in 2000.

There has always been an element of the sepulchral in Segal's oeuvre. By freezing life in a crude instant, as he did through his plaster casting and bronze "double casting" techniques, Segal created human facsimiles—trench coats, sunglasses, high heels, and all—that are anything but lively. He then positions his figures into theatrical arrangements—beneath a street sign, resting on a chair, walking past one another. The faces, captured in a moment, resemble the blank visages of the Napoleon death masks that seem to crowd the world's museums; the bodies, something like the figures caught two millennia ago in the ash clouds of Pompeii. "The Body" is something of a hot subject in critical theory (thanks, Lacan). Segal's hyperreal figures—weak, small, and, let's face it, unimpressive—remind us of the body's impermanence.

When I was working as a literary assistant some years ago in Gstaad, the artist I most ran across in the ski chalets of the well-to-do was Roy Lichtenstein. Just behind him was Miró, and behind Miró David Hockney (especially the landscape work). But who's keeping score. It might go without saying that of the three, and indeed of almost any other artist I can think of, no one produced so many mediocre paintings as Lichtenstein. His Toontown aesthetic was relentlessness and persistent. It could go anywhere, sur-

vive anything, be big or be small—just don't forget the Ben-Day dots, a chuckle, and a yawn.

It therefore comes as a surprise to find a different trick coming from Lichtenstein, like the old killer twisting the knife in a new way. Although this quintessential pop painter had worked in sculpture since 1965, his installation at the Met's roof garden may be the first time that viewers consider his plastic work on its own terms.⁴ What might appear straightforward in reproduction—Lichtenstein paintings die-cut and propped upright—turn out to be quite maniacal, fiendish, and weird when investigated up close. Let's remember what we're dealing with here: an artist who takes the themes of mechanical mass-printing—primary colors, flattened images, off-set screens, the dots—and reproduces them, enlarged, repeatedly, through conventional painting technique. The sculptures, then, take "the Lichtenstein thing" one step further—a copy of a copy passed through multiple mediums. What do Ben-Day dots communicate to the eye on a three-dimensional surface? Why should these dots be in low recess? And the way these sculptures curve and ooze and twist, almost botanically—it's a Lichtenstein greenhouse on the Met roof this summer, a kind of B-movie "it came from Mars" bioterror. In his riffing on the conventions of the day, whether the SAVE ME! chivalry of comic-book characters or the brushstrokes of the Abstract Expressionists, Lichtenstein's art makes social commentary on Americana. *House III* (1997), the ranch-style centerpiece of the Met show, may be the residence of Homer Simpson. But even this most straightforward Levittown icon plays a clever trick on the eye: one that I will not reveal in these pages. Juxtaposed against the hard-edged, modernist New York skyline, the city never looked so inviting. Toontown may be a nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live there.

3 "George Segal: Bronze" opened at Mitchell-Innes & Nash, New York, on April 23 and remains on view until June 14, 2003.

4 "Roy Lichtenstein on the Roof" opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, on May 1 and remains on view until November 2, 2003.

Salzburg chronicle

by Jay Nordlinger

Salzburg was the scene of a lovely festival in the middle of April. But Salzburg is a summer festival, you say—held in August. Yes, that is *the* Salzburg festival, probably the most honored summer festival in the world. But they also host an Easter Festival, over about two weeks. There are four main events: two orchestral concerts, a choral concert, and an opera. This series is repeated—once—allowing for a most satisfying stretch of music-making a few months before the heat of August.

The Easter Festival has been held since 1967, whereas the summer festival has been going since 1920. As in August, the April festival is a same-time-next-year thing, for many. On the first night, I met a couple from Frankfurt who had been coming to the Easter Festival for thirty straight years, and sitting in the same seats (no less). The resident orchestra of the Easter Festival is the Berlin Philharmonic, whereas the dominant orchestra in the summer is the Vienna Philharmonic.

Before I left for Salzburg, I mentioned to someone that I was attending this Easter music festival. He said—quite logically—“Oh, are they doing *Parsifal*?” I said, “No—they’re not doing Easter music, really. Nor are they doing religious music, more generally. It’s just a festival held at the time of Easter.” On reflection, though, I realized this was a stupid answer, because here were the major works for 2003: the Symphony No. 8 of Bruckner; *The Seasons*; *Fidelio*; and

the Symphony No. 5 of Mahler. Each of these masterpieces has more than its share of spirituality. You could even go so far as to say that much of this music is religious. The Bruckner Eighth alone, for example, is worth maybe twenty ordinary masses.

Since last fall, Sir Simon Rattle has been music director of the Berlin Philharmonic, and he was duly on hand. (It was Rattle, recall, who built the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra into a world-renowned power.) On the first night, however, he ceded the baton to Bernard Haitink, the redoubtable Dutchman. In my experience, Haitink has been an uneven conductor—an inconsistent one. I have heard performances (a Brahms Second, for instance) that have made me say, “How, exactly, did he acquire this large reputation?” And I have heard other performances that have made me reply, “Ah: I see.”

His traversal of the Bruckner Eighth—magisterial, unforgettable—certainly belonged to the latter category. Haitink let this symphony unfold to reveal its many glories. Technically, musically, and spiritually, it was well-nigh faultless. This faultlessness began with the very opening, which is easy to botch: but the Berliners would have none of it. This perfect entrance set the standard for the ensuing ninety minutes. Furthermore, nothing prepares the listener—at least the listener unable to hear the Berlin Philharmonic regularly—for that sound. It is a sound so warm, it’s almost

shocking. Even when the music was at its loudest, there was no diminution in aural beauty. Sound is not everything, as I always say, but it is not nothing.

Of course, many of the individual players in this orchestra stood out. I must cite Stefan Dohr, one of the principal hornists. I have carried on about him before: He is the hornist of the Ensemble Wien-Berlin, which played in Alice Tully Hall not long ago. (The Ensemble Wien-Berlin is a wind group made up of first deskmen from both the Berlin Philharmonic and the Vienna Philharmonic.) His technical ability is astonishing, and the colors he can produce on his instrument no less so. Even in the Bruckner Eighth, where every participant is needed and an army must win the fight, Stefan Dohr can't go unnoticed.

Haitink showed the ability to maintain musical tension amid all the beauty that was surrounding him. He rose to each climax—in the first movement and beyond—while retaining the unity of the work overall. It must be said, however, that the Berliners give you the impression that they could conduct themselves. There is great confidence in their playing: no fear, no hesitancy. This makes an enormous difference in a performance. The ending of the first movement—which is subtle—was remarkable for its precision and knowingness.

The second movement—the Scherzo—began with another perfect entrance, courtesy of the hornist Dohr. And the strings demonstrated a particular grace. There was no ponderousness to be found anywhere in the orchestra. Haitink achieved excellent balances, and he took full advantage of Bruckner's pauses. Once more, we had that extraordinary sound: It has been likened to a Rolls Royce, to a cathedral organ—but it has to be heard. And yet, in this Scherzo, I thought that there was almost too much beauty. In wilder sections, I might have asked for something grainier, coarser, grittier. Listening to this orchestra as Bruckner buffets you was like being assailed by gobs of velvet.

The third movement—Adagio—is one of

the signal glories of Bruckner, and of all of symphonic music. It partakes of the character of a hymn, and Haitink and the Berliners brought this out unmistakably. The musicians played so beautifully, Haitink could not repress a smile (and the Dutch maestro is not known for an excess of smiles). As he let the Adagio go on its way, I could see that Haitink was a nice combination of formality and naturalness. He is a disciplinarian who breathes. There is hardly anything more desirable in a conductor.

The Finale, which is marked "nicht schnell," was, nevertheless, rather fast: but compellingly so. Haitink gave it a Brucknerian pulse, and its drive was relentless, inexorable. And yet, this movement—like the performance as a whole—was not ironfisted. It was sure to have beauty and breath. What's more, this was the kind of performance that renews one's appreciation for the work itself. When Haitink was through, it was clear that he knew that he and the orchestra had done something special. Walking off the stage, he pumped his arms, like a boxer or some other triumphant athlete. This was not a typically Haitinkian moment, but it was well earned.

Rarely does one have so powerful and gratifying an experience in a concert hall. There is an essay to be written—I'm sure several have—on the importance of ambience in a musical performance. On the importance of externalities: the setting (in this case, Salzburg, in that storied hall, at Easter); the audience (rapt, expectant, appreciative); one's own frame of mind (or is that an "internality"?). But a good performance of the Bruckner Eighth should take hold anywhere, under any circumstances: even in a vacant lot in Watts.

The music director, Sir Simon Rattle, took over for *The Seasons*, one of Haydn's great oratorios. Rattle remains a boyish, exuberant conductor, though his vast halo of curly hair has turned white. He is a conductor whom most find interesting to watch, for he is always in motion, and those motions can be exaggerated. Rattle is full of

energy—wired—rather like Lorin Maazel, New York's own Energizer bunny, although the two men's gestures are quite different. In almost everything he does, Rattle is dramatic, physically. Even when he asks soloists and orchestra members to rise, he does so with theatrical flair.

His Haydn was far from dainty or polite Haydn: It was big and robust. This performance was even Romantic in its emotions, although it did not seem wrong. Rattle's dynamics were rather daring, in their extremes. *The Seasons*—like the four seasons themselves, I suppose—was marked by huge swings. The conductor endued the piece with blood and guts, and he had manifest fun while doing so. It was written on his face, and in his motions.

The orchestra's playing was both clean and lush, which is a neat trick. And the singing of the Arnold Schoenberg Choir was superb. It was warm and inviting; and then it was lusty, gay, terrifying, and everything else Haydn demands. The chorus, as it stood, was not bunched up, but spaced out in two very long lines, which perhaps contributed to attractive balances.

The oratorio used three soloists, of whom two are world-famous: the tenor Ian Bostridge and the bass-baritone Thomas Quasthoff. The third singer is less well known, but she was outstanding, the revelation of the night, from my point of view. She was Christiane Oelze, a soprano born in Cologne. Her singing was pure, calm, and unaffected. She evinced an excellent sense of line. She has a small, lively voice, yet she can create an impression of bigness. I can't think of a voice quite like it, for comparative purposes. The voice, pretty as it is, has some bite, along with some power. And Oelze displayed exemplary technique—I hold in my head several specific examples. So too, she portrayed her character (Hanne, the farmer's daughter) with winsome insight.

Ian Bostridge showed off his smooth, fetching tenor. And am I the last one to notice, or has he recently developed a robust lower register? As usual, he sang ex-

pressively, lending the words maximum meaning. He communicates intimately with an audience, and at times painfully.

Thomas Quasthoff started a little rough, but he soon settled down to give one of his typical performances: wise, virile, beautiful, burnished. At a late point in the oratorio, he put on simply a clinic of technique, executing difficult intervals with ease. And one couldn't help noticing that he enjoyed "conducting" the oratorio with his head and face, all through. A brainy, learned, and exacting musician, he would have made a fine conductor.

There was a tremendous amount of musicality on that stage, with that conductor, those orchestral musicians, that chorus, and those three soloists. The solo voices were especially pleasing together, matching well. And anyone inclined to doubt the profound greatness of Haydn should listen to *The Seasons*—and thereafter, *The Creation*!

An extremely curious thing occurred during this performance. In the first half, there were a few scattered coughs—minor stuff. And Ian Bostridge and Thomas Quasthoff would openly glare in the direction of the coughs. Before the second half began, a festival official appeared to ask the audience to keep its coughing down. He did so in a gentle, humorous way. But in the second half, the coughing—of which all were now inescapably aware—seemed to increase, although it was still quite minor. These musicians should come to New York! Our halls frequently sound like tuberculosis wards. Festival Hall in Salzburg was a tomb by comparison.

And when Bostridge was displeased with certain sounds from the orchestra—the horns, in particular—he made a bad face, giving the soprano a look and shaking his head. He should not suppose that such actions are invisible. It was—as Bostridge's fellow Englishmen might say—bad form.

Beginning the next evening's concert was a Beethoven piano concerto, that in C major. At the keyboard was one of Sir Simon's favorite pianists: young Lars Vogt. New

Yorkers had had an opportunity to hear him a few weeks prior, in duo recital with Sarah Chang, the (also young) violinist. Chang was excellent; Vogt was less so.

The orchestra played the opening of the concerto with rare delicacy—but, unfortunately, that opening was also botched, the orchestra being out of sync. When the pianist came in, he missed his opening, too (as some of the notes failed to sound). He may well have been nervous. His playing thereafter was extremely tight, much of it clumsy, clunky, and awkward. Notes were wrongly accented, and many were (wrongly) clipped. There is nothing wrong with aggressive Beethoven, done with a certain authority, but a proper sense of line was missing. I had the impression that this young man had listened to a lot of Alfred Brendel recordings (which most people would regard as a very good thing). It should be noted, however, that Vogt played his cadenza with imagination and esprit.

He also gave a beautiful statement of the theme of the Largo. But then he spoils his playing with these sudden, brusque, out-of-place accents. It's like a pool of water interrupted by unwanted waves—or like a person talking in an even voice and then shouting out certain words, for no purpose. Also, Rattle made this movement excessively free, causing it to drift uncertainly.

The closing rondo was spirited, but it was also rather mechanical and jabbed at. It ought to have lightness, humor, impishness: These were not in great evidence. Vogt often played with a mailed fist, allowing for little grace or lilt. Furthermore, many of the notes that Beethoven intends for you to savor, were not. But the musical powers-that-be are very high on this young man, and so was the Salzburg audience, which whooped and stomped its feet.

The balance of the concert was given over to the Fifth Symphony of Mahler. This is a symphony that Rattle and the Berliners recorded right away, shortly after the new conductor took up his post. The Fifth is obviously a work close to Rattle's heart, and he conducts it as though he will never have

another chance (which is not a bad way to work). He pours everything he has into the conducting of a piece like this. In his physical involvement, he is almost simian. I come from a more economical school of conducting, but I am also on record—many times—as saying that a conductor should do what he must to get the results he desires.

In the first movement of the Mahler, Rattle led his forces with keen awareness. I, for one, heard things in the score that had escaped my notice. Rattle was making more than a great, jumbled Mahlerian noise. All night long, he was completely engaged, and the players seemed locked in on him. But shouldn't this be normal, unremarkable? It should be normal—but it is not unremarkable, sadly, as any regular concertgoer knows. The second movement, like the first, was conducted at full throttle, all passion, with no let-up. Rattle was intent on wringing every drop out of this music. He was almost mannered in his musical exaggerations, but not quite.

For the third movement—the Scherzo—Rattle did something out of the ordinary. He had Stefan Dohr come to the front of the stage, in front of the orchestra, to stand and play as though in a concerto. The principal horn part is even more prominent in this movement than elsewhere in the symphony. Dohr proved—redundantly—that he is about the best in his field. Nevertheless, I question the decision to place him out front. It was something of a gimmick. There is a lot more than a solo horn going on in that movement, and there is much for that horn to do in other movements.

The ensuing Adagietto was ethereal, to be sure. (How can it not be?) But it was also overripe, swoony. Rattle milked the piece—and it, of all pieces, does not have to be milked. Mahler wrote the “milking” in; all a conductor has to do is let it unfold, and get out of its way. Rattle was gobbing paint on a lily.

The Finale began with—yawn—another perfect Dohr entrance. But as the movement proceeded, we seemed to be going—

for the first time—phrase by phrase, losing sight of the work as a whole. Rattle's inexhaustibility became exhausting. His sudden pullings back of sound grew a bit wearisome. And when everything is a climax, there is no climax, when the actual climax comes. We are spent; we have nothing left to give. This is a problem with a full-throttle, fifth-gear, almost emotionally desperate performance.

And yet, there had been much, much good in Sir Simon's account. I can think of many worse ways to spend the night of Easter—even if the Mahler symphony chosen was the Fifth, and not the Second, known to us as "the Resurrection."

The grand finale of this festival was the opera: *Fidelio*. This is Beethoven's hymn of freedom and light—or one of them, rather—and, incidentally, the greatest paean to marital love in art. Salzburg had a new production by Nikolaus Lehnhoff: It was modernistic, mainly silver in color, and effective. There were some ridiculous and semi-ridiculous things, of course—as is de rigueur in opera houses today—and the sets creaked, causing giggles. But there was a lot to admire about the production, which was unconventional without being absurd.

There was a lot to admire about the performance, too—but not the overture. Under Rattle's baton, it was flabby, undisciplined (and not very Germanic at all, no matter that the orchestra in the pit was the Berlin Philharmonic). The Act I quartet, however, was warm and heavenly, as we have a right to expect. Rattle's affection for *Fidelio* was unmistakable. I would not have had him rush through Beethoven's final, exultant chorus; I would have had him glory in it, thoroughly. But this is a conductor whose enthusiasm is hard to gainsay.

In the title role was Angela Denoke, who

has a big, gorgeous instrument. Unfortunately, it was not well deployed on this occasion, as she was repeatedly flat on almost anything above mid-range. Some notes, she barely attempted at all, only hinting at them. But she was game, and one rooted for her. Her tenor was *not* Ben Heppner—who has been the Florestan of choice on the world's stages for the past many years, it seems—but Jon Villars, a fresh voice. That voice is heroic, too, recalling another Jon, Vickers. His heroic voice gave out alarmingly at the end of his big aria, but he came back admirably.

The other roles were well filled. Juliane Banse was utterly sincere as Marzelline, and Rainer Trost, singing Jaquino, proved a sparkplug of a tenor. He is a young man, and it will be good to hear him in other, bigger parts. László Polgár was a solid and sympathetic Rocco. His portrayal was memorable, as he cowered, for example, before the evil Don Pizarro. That was Alan Held, excellent as usual, all jackboots and animal hate. And Thomas Quasthoff stood tall as Don Fernando, administering justice in the end.

If I may append a somewhat unusual note. About a week before I saw this performance, I received a letter from a reader who had been following the news out of Iraq. He had noted the discovery of an underground prison, whose inmates were freed by Allied forces. They had not seen the light in a long time. They shielded their eyes as they stumbled out, in their rags. Their families were gathered to identify and embrace them, with great relief and tears. The letter-writer was reminded, of course, of *Fidelio*, with its prisoners emerging into the light. "O welche Lust," he quoted. "O welche Lust! In freier Luft . . ." Yes, what joy to breathe free air.

Anywhere, always.

The media

Spurious objectivity

by James Bowman

The bias of the BBC with respect to the British and American war effort in Iraq, mentioned in this space last month, has contributed to a formal complaint to the Corporation by the British Conservative party leader, Iain Duncan Smith. Mr. Duncan Smith was particularly incensed by coverage of the recent local elections in Britain, in which the Tories did very well, although the BBC's commentators minimized their successes. Citing the views of Rod Liddle, a former editor of the BBC radio "Today" program, Mr. Duncan Smith noted that "He says it is not just by accident, it happens all the damn time They set their mind about how they perceive you and report you and do nothing but report in that light. They should be news-led."

Mr. Liddle's is an interesting case. While working at the BBC he also wrote a column for the left-leaning *Guardian* newspaper in which, last September, he defied his bosses at the network by expressing a forcefully negative opinion about the Liberty and Livelihood march by the Countryside Alliance in opposition to the Labour government's attempts to ban fox-hunting and to pass other policies detrimental to farmers and landowners. Mr. Liddle wrote that the sight of so many toffs, as he saw them, marching for even more money and the right to go on killing foxes would remind people why they had voted Labour in the first place. But if this was a view widely

shared at the BBC, it was also one that could not be stated publicly by a BBC employee, and so Mr. Liddle was fired.

He took the opportunity to reveal that just after the Queen Mother's death, he had been instructed to terminate a conservative commentary slot by the novelist Frederick Forsyth—one that the former Queen had liked—on the grounds that it had become "stale." In fact it was simply hated by the corporate brass, which could not by the rules of the game as it is played in Britain admit to their bias. Since then Liddle has become a rather unlikely hero to those, mainly with political views very different from his own, who have grown particularly exasperated by the charade of "objectivity" at what is essentially a publicly-funded broadcast service.

At the time of the offending column, for example, *The Telegraph* had editorialized against Liddle, accusing him of "blatant bias, animus and even party allegiance, while running an important news programme for the corporation whose charter insists on the absence of all three." His firing coincided with the appearance of this editorial. Yet since then many on the right, now including Mr. Duncan Smith, have clasped him to their bosom on the grounds that here, at least, was a lefty who believed in open and not hidden bias. If so, he is a dagger pointed at the heart of the BBC, and he seems to be enjoying the part.

The two distinct media cultures in Britain

provide some illumination of the more murky situation in America. There, the print media are a flourishing and delightful mélange of competing points of view covering the spectrum of opinion from left (the *Guardian*, the *Mirror*, the *Independent*, the *New Statesman*) to right (the *Telegraph*, the *Mail*, the *Sun*, the *Spectator*). Fairness is not always the hallmark of these publications, but it is so often enough that it is not at all uncommon to read the views of avowed leftists in the right-leaning publications and vice versa. When I was in London recently, the *Telegraph* ran a positively rabid piece of anti-Americanism by Margaret Drabble headed “I loathe America, and what it has done to the rest of the world”—in which she confesses (and then proceeds to over-demonstrate the point) that “my anti-Americanism has become almost uncontrollable”—though the *Telegraph* imprints have been in general by far the most pro-American of the London papers recently.

But when it comes to broadcasting, the British journalistic culture, like the American, is dominated not by an ideal of fairness but by one of “objectivity”—probably because the BBC all but invented the idea of objectivity. As a government subsidized service—through the disguised tax of the “license fee” that must be paid by anyone owning a television set—the BBC has historically recognized the requirement that, like the monarch, it must not take sides on political questions. This requirement of “objectivity” has never worked very well in practice, though forty or fifty years ago it worked a lot better than it does now.

Today even the left-leaning *Private Eye* routinely satirizes the leftward bias of the BBC. Belonging as it does to the more frank and open culture of the print media, the magazine, like Mr. Liddle, is not necessarily out of sympathy with the political views of the BBC’s reporters and editors, but as a satirical publication it is naturally alert to the hypocrisy of promoting those political views while officially insisting on the increasingly transparent fiction of its own

“objectivity.” As Michael Heath, a correspondent of *The Times*, noted recently, in Britain “the broadcast media have effectively become a separate political party. They push an agenda with which many disagree profoundly but against which it is almost impossible to find a platform.”

For our political life this has enormous implications, one of which is the uphill struggle faced by the Conservative Party in presenting its policies. Radio and television have, with some success, attempted to portray both the party and its supporters as simply risible and not a force to be taken seriously. Even the Labour Party cannot afford to be complacent because, although the views of broadcasters are nearer to its own, Labour has also been slapped down hard when diverging from broadcasters’ orthodoxy.

Nor, it should be added, is this broadcasters’ orthodoxy limited to the news. Its presence in drama and entertainment was suggested by the fact that, coincidentally with Mr. Duncan Smith’s complaint against its news division, the BBC was beginning a four-part series called *Cambridge Spies*, a fictionalized treatment of the Soviet spies Burgess, Maclean, Philby, and Blunt, which presented them as heroes rather than traitors. [See John Gross’s “London Journal,” pages 35, for more on this series.—*Ed.*] Of course, this view of the matter is hardly limited to broadcasters. As Miranda Carter pointed out, that ground had already been well staked-out by others including Alan Bennett—and, she might have added, her own biography of Blunt, published last year.

This suggests that the BBC is something of a lagging indicator of the views of the British establishment, but it is still an infallible one. “Broadcasters’ orthodoxy” is really, more or less, just the orthodoxy of the educated élites. Thus the anti-Americanism in the BBC’s treatment of the war in Iraq was neither unusual nor uncongenial to much of its audience, though it rightly brought down on its head another *Telegraph* editorial complaining that:

during the middle of the campaign, the BBC dwelt incessantly on how everything was “bogged down” and how the allies were unwelcome. To anyone watching the BBC alone, victory must have come as a complete surprise. . . . Overriding everything was the impression of vanity, of a medium that thinks itself more important and more honest than anyone else, and that believes that to indicate support for one’s country’s armed forces is a form of unacceptable bias. It is not: it is the natural, humane position of any citizen, just as one would not expect reporters to be neutral between a criminal and a victim.

But the *Telegraph* is the outlier here, while the BBC represents the mainstream—if not of the British as a whole then overwhelmingly of the cultural and intellectual élite.

Another article of faith to these élites at the moment is the irrelevance and wrong-headedness of the Conservative party. The article by Mr. Liddle to which Mr. Duncan Smith was alluding had appeared in that week’s *Spectator* and mentioned five significant and otherwise unignorable facts of which watchers of the BBC would have remained in ignorance. They include the following: (1) that the Welsh and the Scots take remarkably little interest in their new national assemblies, (2) that voters for the British National Party are racist, (3) that the BNP did surprisingly well in the elections, (4) that the Labour party lost significant numbers of votes because of Tony Blair’s support for the Americans in Iraq, and (5) that the Conservative party did fantastically well in the elections.

The last point is the most important because denigration of Mr. Duncan Smith has become a sort of reflex to the British broadcast media, and rarely is any other Conservative interviewed when he is not asked how long the party can put up with such a hopeless leader, and when he is likely to be removed. This line of questioning is to the British media what mock horror about the Bush tax cuts is to the American: a truism which everyone but a few right-wing trog-

lodytes is expected to recognize as such. Liddle concludes that the program of election coverage “was written before the results came in. It was based on the assumption that the Conservatives were bloody useless and would perform badly. And it was insufficiently flexible to change when reality did not meet its expectations.”

This is obviously more than just a question of “bias,” or even of what Mr. Heath calls “broadcasters’ orthodoxy.” It is an attempt to establish a consensus which is as much a concern for the British establishment now that it reflects the *bien pensant* liberalism of polytechnic lecturers and government bureaucrats as it did when it was dominated by Tory landowners and Church of England clergymen. Both kinds of élite are deeply conservative because they have the most to lose from any conceivable reform. Certainly taxpayers and TV license-holders must have something of the old and now largely extinct working classes’ longing for such reform, since they share their sense of disenfranchisement.

Yet it is hard to be sanguine about the possibilities for change. Theresa May, the Tory party chairman, is said to be compiling a dossier of instances of BBC bias and has said that the party “will be seeking meetings at the most senior level.” A BBC spokesman said that the charges would be “investigated,” though of course there is nothing to be investigated that a fair-minded observer could not confirm for himself by watching. Naturally the investigation will discover no deep-laid conspiracies at the Corporation to promote the Labour party at the expense of the Conservatives. Consensus-building is much more subtle than that. And so things will go back to normal, with subtle biases justifying themselves by the fact that they are not openly proclaimed.

Even if the Tories should win the next parliamentary elections, this is likely to remain the case. Unless I have been unduly influenced by the media’s low opinion of him, I find it hard to imagine that Mr. Duncan Smith will succeed in bucking the Establishment where even Mrs. Thatcher

failed. Though the Iron Lady was remarkably tough-minded and unwilling to be swayed by the consensus in some matters—most notably monetary and fiscal stringency, industrial relations, and the Falkland Islands—so that the consensus actually had to be revised in the light of her actions, she gave way to it in several important areas where, if she had been equally true to her own instincts, certain perennial problems might have been solved by now. These include education, the National Health Service, Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe, and the intolerable arrogance and smugness of the BBC.

Mr. Heath, the correspondent of *The Times* who complained about the broadcast media, asked: "Is it a uniquely British disease, I wonder, to find ourselves subjected to the casual hegemony of media professionals?" The answer to that question is of course no, since in America the media culture, print and broadcast alike, is like the broadcasters of Britain: constrained by the official culture of "objectivity"—here promoted by the journalism schools and paid advocates of a bogus journalistic "professionalism"—to pretend that their natural and otherwise harmless biases do not exist. Heterodoxy pops up mainly on *The Wall Street Journal's* editorial page and a few provincial dailies and little magazines, but those who scorn to be intimidated by the shibboleth of professionalism and play to large audiences on the radio are universally derided by their colleagues as mere entertainers.

Nor, to be fair, do even they always understand the difference between *objectivity*, which is a chimera, and *fairness*, with which it is often confused. The pretence of objectivity is the means by which the demands of fairness are routinely dodged. After all, if you acknowledge no bias of your own, you implicitly acknowledge no obligation to those who are differently minded—who are, as you would say, biased *tout court*—either to represent their views fairly or to give them a hearing at all. If you choose not to

recognize certain kinds of opinions even as existing, to what standard or principle can those thus shut out of the conversation appeal if your official stance is one of alleged objectivity and non-partisanship?

Obviously, in any conversation some possibilities are more worth discussing than others, and there will always be a range of opinions—such as that there is a Jewish (or, as my colleague Mark Steyn suggests, a Canadian) conspiracy to rule the world—that serious-minded people will hardly bother discussing. But the exponents of objectivity arrogate to themselves a right of exclusion which those who frankly admitted their biases would never dare claim. Indeed, the admission of a bias of one's own at the outset of any discussion itself creates a *prima facie* obligation to take into account not any possible alternative view but the strongest and most intellectually compelling case that can be made in opposition to one's own.

This is something that is almost *never* done in the American political discussion as it is carried on in the media. It is as if no one hears what anyone else is saying. To read Paul Krugman in *The New York Times*, for example, you would think that the Bush administration was merely mendacious and corrupt, without even the pretence of a serious case to make on behalf of their misguided policies. This, of course, is helpful to Krugman if he doesn't want to have to go to the trouble of answering that case. Likewise, week after week on "Meet the Press" Tim Russert grills politicians of both parties by citing to them whatever he can find in the way of horrific details of projected budget deficits and then asking them if, in the light of this presumably unheard-of information, they will support the repeal of the Bush tax cuts, or oppose the passage of new ones.

But, so far from being unheard-of, the information is well known to everybody. Those who defend the tax cuts do so on the grounds that they will stimulate economic activity and therefore in the long run increase revenue to the Treasury, which will in

turn eliminate the deficits. Their argument may of course be wrong, but Russert does not consider this possibility because he does not consider that they have any argument at all. No matter how often he is told why some people, at least, think the tax cuts are a good thing, it never sinks in, and he treats the next guest in exactly the same way—that is, as if he were defending the *self-evidently* indefensible. This is what is popularly considered to be tough questioning.

That, at any rate, is certainly the view of Bob Edwards, the host of NPR's "Morning Edition," who, as a native of the state of Kentucky, was recently inducted into the Kentucky Journalism Hall of Fame. (I wonder, by the way, if Kentucky has its own baseball, football, basketball, or show-business Hall of Fame? Perhaps Kentuckian readers can advise me.) That same day, Edwards gave the annual Joe Creason Lecture at the University of Kentucky. In it, according to the *Louisville Courier-Journal*, he complained of a lack of "diversity" in radio—by which he did not of course mean diversity of opinion on "Morning Edition"—and said he thought that journalists were too respectful of the President, and given to asking "softball" questions.

He himself, he said, would ask the (presumably) hardball question: "Mr. President, you're asking for \$76 billion to pay for this war, and you'll probably go back to Congress to ask for more. Given the fact that there'll be severe deficits for as long as you are President, why not let your tax cut slide?" It is inconceivable that Bob Edwards does not know why, is not aware of the supply-side argument. He just chooses to consider it as being beneath his notice. Doubtless he would defend his own "objectivity," and yet by refusing even to acknowledge the existence of an argument, and that the key argument, on one side of a contentious issue, how can he be seen otherwise than as an advocate for the opposition

Democrats, who routinely pretend they don't know or don't understand the logic to which the president appeals in proposing tax cuts?

Nor is Edwards finished with the tough questions he thinks should be put to the President. "How," he would ask, "did you expect to win international approval for your plan to invade Iraq when you have repeatedly told the rest of the world that the United States is ready to act alone in virtually every field, as witnessed by your withdrawal from international treaties and agreements having to do with the environment, war crimes, and other matters that the rest of the world considers important?" Again, it is not as if the administration's rationale for all these policies was unknown. It was simply that Edwards in asking for it was choosing to pretend (as the political opposition, encouraged by the media's example, also do) that there was no such rationale, and assuming—or pretending to assume—that Bush would be flummoxed by being asked for one.

If this kind of rhetorical technique is a remarkably unproductive way of carrying on political debate even between avowed opponents in a legislative or forensic setting, how much more unproductive is it as a feature of the discussion of such issues in the supposedly "objective" media? The fault, as I have argued before, is in the idea of objectivity itself. It is an idea to which monopoly newspapers, or a monopoly and partly or wholly government-funded broadcast service such as NPR or the BBC, will continue to cling for obvious reasons. People don't need to take in more than one newspaper, or to listen to more than one extended, in-depth news program such as "Morning Edition," so long as they can be persuaded that that newspaper or news program is "objective" and "unbiased." It therefore becomes the job of every honest commentator to show that they are nothing of the kind.

Satanic mills

by William Logan

More than fifty years ago, during the Truman administration, Sharon Olds's parents tied her to a chair, and she has been writing about it ever since. *The Unswept Room*¹ revisits the realistic dioramas of her childhood, pays homage to the frequently dusted waxwork head of that villain her father—you think you've stumbled, not into some strange museum of natural history, but into Madame Tussaud's.

Olds writes lines of clean American prose, the kind poets chop up in order to call it poetry. Such lines have an artful plainness, like that of Shaker furniture, but also a spiritual dullness—she seems to suffer through the exposition to get to the good bits. Say she has the uncomfortable feeling that she's just met someone. Someone foreign. Or someone dead, then alive. No, not Jesus—she saw Jesus last night on the ceiling. No:

Whom had I found who had been lost to me? I
could not think—and then, I remembered
the round, plump, woven-silver
mirror, which I had held, this bright
morning, between my legs, I had seen,
for the first time, myself, face to feral face.

Oh, of course, her own vagina. The grammar of her last sentence is shaky, but the set-up is as impeccable as the bad taste.

¹ *The Unswept Room*, by Sharon Olds; Alfred A. Knopf, 127 pages, \$25; \$15 (paper).

As performance artist, drama queen, heiress to the extremity of Plath and Sexton, Olds has long been anything but a poet. There really ought to be another name for what she is. At sixty, she has made this odd mixture of revulsion, false modesty, and self-aggrandizement her own. She understands that poetry is responsive to emotion; but, as she tears her hair and bares her breasts and shows you her vagina, you think, *How pathetic*, not *What remarkable poems*. She has made her private pathologies the gossip of the pavement; yet, as she has become more fluent and more practiced (the poet of *Satan Says*, her debut volume of almost a quarter-century ago, was fiercer but more brittle), her persona has grown glassy-eyed, begging for attention, pleading for sympathy. The poems are now ground out like sausages. Olds once said in an interview that she lays aside her first drafts until she can work them into finished poems, and that she was then *fifteen years* behind. You wonder if they're in mini-storage somewhere.

To every boy ever deprived of dinner, every girl who has had her mouth washed out with soap, her poems say, "There, there. One day you can turn all this into poetry." Few poets have examined their bodies more minutely (you feel she hides a speculum in her purse) or taken more childish satisfaction in announcing everything they find. No matter the subject (menopause, masturbation, abortion, teenage lesbianism), no

matter how intimate the anatomy, it is discussed in the same reasonable, droning Surgeon General monotone. Olds has watched herself grow old, with mingled fascination and dread:

Yet when

I look down, I can see, sometimes,
things that if a young woman saw she would
scream, as if at a horror movie,
turned to a crone in an instant—if I lean
far enough forward, I can see the fine
birth skin of my stomach pucker
and hang, in tiny peaks, like wet stucco.

She loves being gruesome under the guise of being honest (how finely observed those details are); yet she's honest only in humdrum, approved ways. When her father dresses up as a woman for a costume party, with tennis balls for breasts, she pictures him with loving exactness (it's as close to loving him as she comes): "he leaned against a bookcase pillar/ nursing his fifth drink, gazing/ around from inside his mascara purdah/ with those salty eyes." Then she sinks, with just a trace of irony, into the tired psychobabble of identity ("as if sensing his full potential"). Later, with smug self-righteousness, she lectures her aged mother on racism. (You wish the old bird would slap her in the face.) The reader has to suppress considerable *Schadenfreude* when Olds's daughter, reading one of the poems in *Satan Says*, takes her to task for calling herself a Jew.

Olds writes so often of birth, of children, of vaginas (particularly her own vagina), it's no surprise that she's creepily obsessed by death—literature may provide a necessary catharsis for our fears, but it doesn't end those fears. (After seeing *Lear*, who is more resigned to death?) Yet the deaths in her poems rarely matter—they serve merely to focus the spotlight firmly back on Sharon Olds. The reader should be warned that in her new poems the mortality rate among friends, relatives, and total strangers is astronomical. *The Unswept Room* begins with the "little family my relative/ killed,

when he was drunk, with his car." Pages later, Marcus Crassus crucifies six thousand former slaves, the army of Spartacus. Then there's a woman with her leg torn off and her neck broken in a car accident. A few pages afterward, a little girl and her mother die after spraying a Christmas tree with lead paint in a closed garage. Then, of course, there's the Holocaust, and after that I lost count.

Kevin Young is a hep cat. The idiom he's cooked up in *Jelly Roll*,² his third book, is partly inspired by, partly pilfered from, that most American of moods and musics, the blues. (When Dickens toured America in the 1840s, he noticed how dour our countrymen were—they were suffering an early spell of the blues.) Robert Johnson's lines, quoted in the epigraph, still cast a spell: "Oh babe/ Our love won't be the same// You break my heart/ When you call Mister So & So's name." Compared to most lyric poetry, they retain the raw wounds of betrayal. To match your talents against lyrics so pithy, bawdy, colloquial, so deft and democratic, is a dangerous game, one that few modern poets, apart from Bishop and Auden, have attempted with success.

It can be difficult to be a young black poet now. You're courted by publishers and anthologists, by the halls of academe; yet post-colonial and subaltern and diaspora scholars, who fight turf battles over what to call themselves, tell you what to write and how to write it, questioning your language and your motives (or, worse, applauding them) before you've written a line. Easier, I suspect, to be a young poet everyone is ignoring. Young has faced the challenge with panache, testing his literary ear in one line and his sidewalk slang the next (the diction can plummet from set theory to street talk very fast); but he never finds how to make the idiom sustain the ambition.

In blues songs, you know what's going

² *Jelly Roll (A Blues)*, by Kevin Young; Alfred A. Knopf, 192 pages, \$23.

on beneath the metaphors—usually something deliciously filthy. Young rarely gets beyond a chaste kiss (there's an awful lot of kissing in this book, and very little of anything else)—the dirtiness is mild and suburban. The hither-thither scat of his syntax at first looks radical, then desperate, then tedious. It's like watching a man going through an identity crisis in a falling elevator. At times the lines slip into a word order Milton would have smiled benevolently upon ("the ants// who my house invaded," "when far// forever from me you went") or descend so deep into the syllables they become near gibberish:

Speakeasy she.
Am sunder.

Are.
She pluck

herself, singing—
I strum. Am.

Strut, straggle,
hum.

This invented patois is not far distant from Berryman's minstrel talk in *The Dream Songs*. I'm all for a language that straddles and questions, dirties and deceives; but Young can't quit playing to the crowd. Though the demotic coarsens the simplicity of his lines ("kudzu takes you all/ a sudden," "clean// as a broke-leg dog"), it quickly decays into the joke demotic of *worser*, *everythang*, *bidness*, and what might be called orthographic slang: *thru*, *tonite*, *yr*, *bldg*, *€*, *wreckt*. Sometimes it's hard to tell the slang from the outright mistakes: "to . . . loose track/ of time," "the dog . . . / lays down," "to slow" (for "too slow"), "none reads// nor believes," and, weirdly, a "six-alarm// APB" (Young seems to confuse the police with the fire department). Without the minstrelsy and winsome wordplay ("raining dogs/ & meows," "Hot-tentot to trot"), he might have to attempt, in his sophisticated way, what blues musicians did so simply and painfully: mourn losses

nearly unbearable, with a wryness that cannot soften misfortune.

There's far too much jive in this dispiriting and undernourished book (blues singers didn't need a back slap or a high five), and only rarely the wit of which this poet is capable, or his delicate ear for mood, tone, and half-rhyme. Young can write a couplet Seamus Heaney would admire ("The narrow hollow/ of her spine, lying fallow") or imitate the soul of the blues: "Creek done risen/ Creek done rose// It ain't the creek that/ took off all them clothes." Among younger poets, he's trying to make a different noise, but the reader hears only the echo of what that might be. Young seems more comfortable being the darling of a coterie, a young academic poet who has already held a prestigious fellowship, edited two anthologies, and been seated cozily in a named chair. His ingenuity is wasted on the sappy, lovelorn sentiments that are his idea of the blues:

I have folded instead

my sorrows like a winter
garment—moth-filled

unwashed—I will
no more wear.

I wonder what Robert Johnson would have made of that.

Karl Kirchwey might have been happier had the Roman Empire never fallen. The poems in *At the Palace of Jove*³ are stuffed with ancient statuary and fallen myths, like the classical wing of the Louvre. He's serious in an old-fashioned way (and old-fashioned in a serious way), hopeless as Larkin's "ruin-bibber, randy for antique"; but beneath their marble surfaces his poems have a bleak modern sensibility. A rich man, Vedius Pollio, has invited the Emperor Augustus to dinner:

3 *At the Palace of Jove*, by Karl Kirchwey; G. P. Putnam's Sons, 77 pages, \$26; \$15 (paper).

the Emperor smiles appreciatively at
the sow's vagina stuffed with figs, the dancing
girl,
the Falernian pale in a crystal beaker . . .

but then a young slave's hand slips; the glass
shatters
on the mosaicked floor. There is a silence,
and Pollio says —Let him swim with
the carnivorous eels.
Before he can be dragged away, the boy
kneels
at Augustus' feet.

It's not the slave whom Augustus punishes. Kirchwey loves the sudden accession of the past—readers not of a historical temper may still find it heartening to know that fools weren't suffered gladly, even two millennia ago. Those who do not learn from history, it's sometimes said, are doomed to repeat it next semester—yet I have trouble convincing students they should study anything not immediately relevant to their lives. I asked a class that had just read a selection by Whitman, as well as a long biographical note, to tell me his birth date, within ten years. The guesses, and they *were* guesses, ranged from 1840 to 1920—this might seem highly flattering to Whitman's modernity, but to college students 1920 comes just after the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the Greeks and the Romans are dead to us—I had a student, only last fall, who thought the Greeks *themselves* were myths. The class laughed, and I laughed, but there was more than a little truth to her belief. Kirchwey will seem mildewed and musty to such students: he wants to write about Goethe, about St. Augustine, wants to retell an anecdote about Mozart or compose (like a literary Mozart) variations on a postcard by T. S. Eliot. He'll quote Sir Thomas Browne, or Aristotle, or Pliny, or St. Paul, always with a sense that the past does not merely console us; it humbles us. Not all poets want to be humbled by what they cannot change.

Kirchwey's poems have settled into a rhetoric increasingly stately and command-

ing, inheriting the mantle of formal poets like Hecht and Wilbur while only rarely taking on the burdens of meter and rhyme (others might call them freedoms). His poems on modern subjects have a grace, even a graciousness, learned from the antique in different measures and very different modes. A satire on the Midas myth ("my husband's Chair of the Greater Phrygia Bank./ Why don't you bring your kids down sometime to look// at our gold?") mocks the vanity of poets; but an elegy for an uncle, a World War II pilot killed in the Pacific, reminds us that we live only by the sacrifice of the dead, and therefore in their shadows.

Shadows fall frequently over these poems, from lives corrupted, crippled, or destroyed (Kirchwey makes reading seem our moral duty to the past). His gravitas is not the fashion now (perhaps it will never be the fashion again); such poetry recalls, not just how much we owe the past, but that without it our lives are meaningless. As a poet he's far from perfect—some of his endings harrumph in a peremptory way, while others drift off half-heartedly or in dreamy distraction. One or two poems are sillier than the porter's jokes in *Macbeth*. Yet few poets now can manage a tender scene without bringing along a sack of handkerchiefs to mop up the tears. Here the poet watches the little girl (he's an observer, not a voyeur) in Chardin's "The Morning Toilet":

There is a gilded missal on the chair,
and, lying half-on, half-off, a crumpled muff,
as if after a sexual encounter.

The girl's blue cape lights the severities of
her mother's regard, a celestial blue,
the Virgin's color. She stands very still
so she won't be scolded, but steals a glance
into the mirror where the fabrics crowd,
their nap and sheen of penitential love,
her glance, hooded but palpitant and yearning,
which asks, across the ticking silence, *Will
I be desired? Will I be beautiful?*

It is her first glimpse of herself dawning,
and standing between her and the answer
is the candle her mother has just extinguished,
smoke rising in a desultory curl.

A poet who can return the past to such purposes needs no apologies for not being up to date.

Les Murray's outsize character suits the outsize country (but miniature continent) from which he comes. The thin rim of civilization along Australia's shores conceals a vast emptiness within. People keep telling me, like proud parents, how wonderfully grown-up Murray's poems are, how soon they will win the Nobel Prize; but such praise ignores the un-toilet-trained creatures his poems often are. The beady-eyed concentration of *Poems the Size of Photographs*⁴ is a departure—almost all Murray's new poems are shorter than sonnets.

It took me a long while to realize there were two Murrays, one (the good twin) who loves to wrap a mystery inside an enigma, like a chocolate bonbon. That Murray writes lines with a delayed charge, so you're deep into the next poem when the Semtex goes off. You wish he could write whole poems with the cunning violation of lines like "people/ who first encountered roses in soap," or "waterbirds had liftoff as at a repeal of gravity," or, describing a cemetery, the "absorbed marble chess of the dead." English poetry hasn't enjoyed an intelligence as idiosyncratic since Auden, yet the mad-professor metaphors sometimes go awry:

Trees, which wrap heights in pages
self-knitted from ground water and light

are stood scrolls best read unopened.

By the time you unknot (or unknit) the images, you've lost the point—and the cleverness comes at a price, the price of accuracy. Wood pulp isn't knitted into paper (that's too orderly); and growth rings are concentric, not spiraling like scrolls. Even if his defenders love his sloppy, booming ways—he's a real roarer—such knowing metaphors invite the salt of pedantry.

⁴ *Poems the Size of Photographs*, by Les Murray; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 115 pages, \$23.

Murray has an anti-romantic, even antagonistic relation to his art (a curious aesthetic for a Christian). Like William Carlos Williams, he'll make poems from whatever comes along, from ideas scrawled on the back of matchbook covers. If he found himself on a desert island with nothing but spit, candy wrappers, and fish bones, he'd make a poem out of them. Such a contingent imagination takes the whole alien world as its subject, but risks the self-parody and boorishness of trivia. At their best, the poems force the present to remember the unhealed tragedies of the past:

Out on the fells and low fields
in twilight, it was the Satanic mills
come again: the farm beasts of Britain
being burnt inside walls of their feed.

The judgment is visually dramatic, a quiet indictment of factory-farm ethics—the burnt corpses of Britain's mad cows are laid at the doorstep of Blake's Satanic mills.

Just when you think you can't resist a poet capable of such darkly moral observations, up saunters the other Murray, the loutish twin who loves dumb jokes and galumphing rhymes like "Hoon, hoon, that blowfly croon:/ first a pimp and then a goon./ Sound of a prop plane crossing the moon." Or poems whose very idea is the wrong idea, like "The Engineer Formerly Known as Strangelove":

I've also quit the White race. The accident of pallor became not worth the flak.
I won't join another. Race is decadent.
I lay this wreath on your unknown grave,
mein Führer.

In my third sunrise century, Germany
has re-conquered Europe on her knees.
Fighter planes still pull gravities, not levities
but the flag of the West is now a gourmet
tablecloth.

The Cold War is a Dämmerung long since of
dead Götter
but I am still in cutting-edge high tech.

In a think-tank up to my neck
I rotate, projecting scenarios.

It's almost a parody of the hamfisted poems Joseph Brodsky wrote in English. Can it get worse? Of course it can. Consider "The Great Cuisine Cleaver Dance Sonnet": "dock pork slice slice/ candy pork mouth size/ heel-and-toe work walk/ thru greens wad widths/ bloc duck bisect bone."

Love me for my flaws, such laborious jokes seem to say. Murray's childishness reminds me of Roethke's, and like Roethke he has no ear for tone. The thumb-sucking rhymes and formula jokes (the sentences piled up like building blocks) are proud of their immaturity. They have nothing to offer poems more guarded in instinct and gesture, many of which show off his love of a country still odd and colonial and undeveloped—surely the only country to have produced great movies about sheep-shearing and Coca-Cola.

Henry James wrote a story called "The Private Life," set at a Swiss inn, where the novelist Clare Vawdrey, beloved for his charm and ease around the dinner table, is not the Clare Vawdrey who writes—no, that Clare Vawdrey, his secret twin, stays upstairs in the hotel room scribbling away. The evil Murray, the buffoonish and lumbering gladhander, gets the attention of the crowd. How much I would give for more of that mysterious scribbler upstairs.

Marie Ponsot had the misfortune to publish her first book with City Lights just after *Howl*, and she's still sometimes included in anthologies of Beat poets. Early readers must have been bewildered to find her on the shelf next to Patchen, and Rexroth, and Ferlinghetti. What did they make of her? What did she make of herself? She wasn't as original as Elizabeth Bishop, whose early poems had been admired by Jarrell and Lowell (not just because the poems were wonderful, but also because they didn't seem threatening—if only the men had known!). Ponsot's poems were perhaps too off-beat and whimsical to catch the eyes of critics—I

suspect she was ignored at first because she was a woman, and later because she wasn't the right sort of woman. She didn't publish another book for a quarter-century.

The delirious, off-kilter poems in *Springing: New and Selected Poems*⁵ reveal that Ponsot sprang fully formed into poetry. From the beginning, she looked at the world with a tilted head and a bright eye, like some rare cockatoo. If her sprightliness and prickly delicacy are indebted to Moore and Auden (with the graced touch of Hopkins), she followed her own inclinations, even when they were nobody else's. (A poet has to be beyond mockery, if not self-mockery, to write a sestina on residual polio paralysis.) Like Moore, she has a mind always darting in unexpected directions; and she is not afraid of seeming ridiculous.

I've been pole when some asked, so they
could vault
supported, high as they like, letting me drop
intact, and roll safe to a grassy stop.
We've gone our ways with pleasure and
without fault,
they to the next race, I to the next use
poles are put to by the great competitors.

No poet of any vanity could write such naked verse, touched uncomfortably with pathos, yet brutal. She ends the poem with a line about sharks and poison and likes it so much she repeats it, in French! Then you realize the French was meant to be the title (the real title is "The Title's Last") and that it deliberately spoils what would have been a perfect sonnet.

Not much happens in Ponsot's poems. They're about family, or work, some odd thought she had, stray regrets, a book she's read—they're so quietly proposed (and so angularly disposed), you're surprised she's rarely tedious. It's difficult to convey the complicated surprises and reversals embedded in her lines—she has sonnets like little stories by Chekhov, who would not

⁵ *Springing: New and Selected Poems*, by Marie Ponsot; Alfred A. Knopf, 237 pages, \$25.

have disapproved of her uses of moral comedy. She's therefore weakest when her poems succumb to her sense of injustice.

You start a Ponsot poem not expecting to be surprised, and end surprised that you *were* surprised. Poets try to shock you so often now by placing a whoopic cushion on your chair, or emptying a bucket of water on your head (we have a poet laureate who does little else), it's good to remember what a twist of syntax can do, or the right wrong word. Ponsot throws poems together out of any old garments lying around—they're like Matisse's late collages, apparently done with an intelligent pair of scissors. Perhaps more poems should be about quiet off-center things—hers feature no cut thumbs, no car crashes, no buildings razed by explosion, no partings of the Red Sea. Many poets believe they're Cecil B. DeMille, with special effects budgets that would beggar the book of Genesis.

Ponsot's poems are content with the homely movements of one woman through the world—a woman tentative, alive to her losses, always willing to make less of things. She finds more drama in spending a day at the beach, or telling a story to some sleepy youngsters, than most poets could in the fall of Troy. There are sorrows, as in any life; but her poems about a parachutist dead in World War II, or a boy who commits suicide, have less inside to compel them—they're formed too stiffly by the imposition of their subjects. Here's a sonnet that might be a feminist plaint if it didn't seem personal:

Little Jacqueline Pascal played with Blaise
re-inventing Euclid (Papa told them to).
While he made up conic sections, she wrote
plays
& got papa out of jail when Richelieu
liked her long impromptu poem in his praise.
I haven't read her verse. It's not in print.
Blaise invented: the wristwatch, a kind
of computer, fluid mechanics, the hint
for digital calques, probabilities,
the syringe, space as vacuum, the claims of lay
theologians. He thought (he thought) at his
ease.

In her convent Jacqueline kept the rules.
On or under every desert there are pools.

I keep thinking that should be “broke the rules”—but the girl *chooses* to accept them, despite the desert of intellectual imagination (yet perhaps spiritual grace) they promise. It's like finding out that, after the witch had been shoved in the oven, Hansel became a jet propulsion engineer and Gretel slaved in a bakery. But the poem isn't really about the Pascal children. If Ponsot's modesty sometimes looks like cowardice, it's her gift to make you think, then make you think again.

Henri Cole's *Middle Earth*⁶ is an autobiography in lightning flashes. Groping its way forward image by image (his weakest poems seem nothing but images), brutally revealing, addicted to the beautiful and sickened by it, this is the most intimate book in American poetry since Plath's *Ariel*. The poems, most of them brief, sonnet length while refusing to be sonnets, are an inner monologue performed before the shadows of parents, lovers, anyone who has seen the outer surface of the man and mistaken him (Cole is an observer any former lover would fear, but it's himself he lashes). He faces the world wearing a mask, as if to protect the world from his moral ugliness and himself from the world's sorrows: “This is the world God didn't create,/ but an artist copying the original”:

In the alps, a little trolley grinds its gears,
floating into the valley, where heavy droplets
fall,
as the farmer's wife hurries—like a moving
target
or a mind thinking—to unpin her laundry
from the wet white clothesline, and the farmer,
in the granary, stifles the little cries
of the neighbor girl parting her lips.
If the meaning of life is love, no one seems to
be aware,

6 *Middle Earth*, by Henri Cole; Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 57 pages, \$23.

not even Mary and Joseph, exhausted with
puffy eyes,
fleeing their dim golden crib.

Little . . . little. Even in such miniatures, the poet measures the malfecundity of parents; yet his poems rarely accept the easy *j'accuse* that animates, even dominates, most poems on Freud's family drama. The poet elicits the reader's uneasy sympathy by his plangent self-hatred, which rises to the surface of his poems like a corpse from the bottom of a lake. His mother and father rule like distant, irrational gods—he is angry at them the way a child is, out of ritual obeisance.

Cole is unusual among his contemporaries not only for his devotion to images violent with artistic occasion, redolent with the scent of great literature. (How many poets consciously challenge their ancestors—I mean distant ones like Milton and Shakespeare, not merely local demigods like Ashbery and Merrill?) He has committed himself to the scarifying honesties of his homosexuality—his scorched loneliness, his shivering anxieties—at a time when “queer studies” has overrun the universities with an upbeat version of what once was suffered in silence.

After the death of my father, I locked
myself in my room, bored and animal-like.
The travel clock, the Johnnie Walker bottle,
the parrot tulips—everything possessed his face,
chaste and obscure. Snow and rain battered
the air
white, insane, slathery. Nothing poured
out of me except sensibility, dilated.
It was as if I were *sub-born*—preverbal,
truculent, pure—with hard ivory arms
reaching out into a dark and crowded space,
illuminated like a perforated silver box
or a little room in which glowing cigarettes
came and went, like souls losing magnitude,
but none with the battered hand I knew.

Little is a favorite word of a poet obsessed,
like Elizabeth Bishop, with the particulars

of shrinkage, wastage, disappearance (*squalid* and *squalor* are others). We reveal ourselves in our repetitions; and Cole returns again and again to primal scenes, not just preverbal but prelapsarian, Eden before Adam and Eve muddied it with their footprints. Cole has become one of our best poets of flowers (he is to botany what Sharon Olds is to vaginas), immersing himself in a world of apes, deer, carp, whales, elephants because no human can reject him there. (When he writes of wood storks, however, “soaring on thermals everywhere,” that is what vultures do, not storks.)

Such a poet welcomes his suffering, not because he prefers to suffer, but because suffering is the atmosphere he has learned to breathe. Yet even in small ways he shows how language brings the world so close it can almost be touched. When he writes, “The myth of love for another remained/ bright and plausible, like an athlete painted/ on the slope of a vase tying his sandal,” the image is resurrected from the dead air of museums. That the athlete is tying a sandal, rather than hurling a javelin, suggests the moment just before action, or just after, when like a lover he can be contemplated in repose—though such vases are usually behind glass.

Poetry is remarkable for the intimacies it allows. Shakespeare's sonnets attract us still, not just because of their verbal splendors, but because his voice crosses the barrier of the grave. His poems, like Donne's and Keats's and Dickinson's, have not drowned in the Sargasso of discarded poetic diction. (Table talk and letters sometimes bring even minor poets to our ears, when their poems no longer can.) To survive its passage down decades, the poetry of our new century will require a speech not already icy with habit. Henri Cole's new poems, proud and knowing and wounded, archly suspicious, can be revealing because they guard their privacies so well. *Middle Earth* escapes all the praise I can heap upon it.

A nose for the bogus

by Brooke Allen

The subtitle of *As of This Writing*, Clive James's new collection of literary and cultural criticism, is "The Essential Essays, 1968–2002."¹ It would be easy to condemn the adjective as hubristic: "essential" to whom? one might ask. But in fact the forty-seven pieces presented here, which deal with cultural icons ranging from Philip Larkin and Bertrand Russell to Germaine Greer and Federico Fellini, are of a remarkably high level and might without undue hyperbole be called essential—if not to the general reader then at least to the educated one. Good literary critics (and most of these essays are about literature) are rare, and, while James's enormous output, over a forty-year career that has included long stints as a television performer and critic, has inevitably produced lots of ephemera, his longer essays on subjects he is passionately for or against are well worth keeping for frequent reference. He is also one of the very rare critics who inspire the reader to explore new and more challenging fictional territory, read more poetry, look at familiar movies with a fresh appreciation.

Critics have always been regarded, at least by some, as a species of cultural parasite, and are sometimes obliged to justify their activities to a public that deifies the creative imagination at the expense of what they see

as arid intellectualism. As the cliché would have it, those who can't create, criticize. I was recently attacked, for example, by a sculptress when I told her I was reviewing Claire Tomalin's biography of Pepys. "A review of a *biography* of a *writer*?" she asked incredulously. "Isn't that a little precious? If people are interested, why don't they simply read Pepys's own work?"

I was not able to formulate a pithy explanation at the moment, but I thought, later, about *how* I should have answered her. The reason, I realized, that criticism is important—even criticism of the work of other critics—is that a culture amounts to a sort of extended conversation, and conversation demands response and commentary as well as declarative statements. As Clive James himself put it, in a recent article in the *The Guardian*, "The role of the freelance man of letters . . . is to accept—and to act on the acceptance—that he is engaged in a perpetual discussion, an interminable exchange of views in which he cannot, and should not, prevail. If he could prevail, and the discussion did terminate, he would become his enemy, the dogmatist whose only answer to opposition is annihilation."

The written cultural discussion in which the critic participates is perhaps more important in the Anglo-Saxon world—Great Britain, the United States, Australia, Canada—than in other societies, because Anglo-Saxon society does not consider literature a fit subject for casual chit-chat.

¹ *As of This Writing: The Essential Essays, 1968–2002*, by Clive James; W. W. Norton & Company, 606 pages, \$35.

You will not find a group of Americans, even if they are professional critics or academics, discussing Milton at the dinner table. Book contracts, tenure squabbles, even the current state of Milton studies, yes; but not Milton's actual poetry. The man of letters, then, has an important role in creating the kind of cultural receptivity that will welcome artistic endeavor.

Criticism is not indispensable to art. It is indispensable to civilization—a more inclusive thing. When Pushkin lamented the absence of criticism in Russia, he wasn't begging for assistance in writing poems. He wanted to write them in a civilized country. Literary criticism fulfils its responsibility by contributing to civilization, whose dependence in all its forms is amply demonstrated by what happens when critical enquiry is forbidden. Being indispensable to civilization should be a big enough ambition for any critic. Unfortunately some critics, not always the less gifted, want to be indispensable to art.

This is well said, and going back to the example of Pepys it is instructive to note that since the Claire Tomalin biography appeared, accompanied by many favorable reviews and essays, Pepys's *Diary* has gained the kind of widespread, middlebrow readership that it has not had for a century or more. There is even a popular website presenting daily installments. This would never have been the case without the intervention of the biographer and the enthusiastic critics in her wake.

Most of the essays in *As of This Writing* first appeared in print years ago, and in the spirit of treating criticism as discussion, James has appended "postscripts" to each essay, in which he comments on the opinions of his younger self. Most of these postscripts are reprinted from two of James's earlier collections, *The Metropolitan Critic* (1974, reprinted in 1992) and *Reliable Essays* (2001). The postscripts, on the whole, are not really necessary: either the pieces stand on their own (and most of them do

so, very well) or they don't, and if one of them requires too much retrospective commentary it is because it has failed in some fundamental way.

At their best, the postscripts serve not so much to correct or improve upon earlier judgments as simply to remove the velvet gloves. The older James is less respectful of big reputations than the younger one. For example, one suspects, reading his 1969 piece on F. R. Leavis, that the courteous tone is not entirely sincere, considering the deep chasm between Leavis's uncompromising aesthetic and James's more flexible one: unlike Leavis, James seems to believe that literature, like life, is too important to be taken seriously. And we find that the 1994 postscript to the Leavis essay confirms our suspicion: "Though a few chips had appeared in his plinth by that stage, F. R. Leavis's prestige was still mighty, so it was quite standard procedure to screw up the tone of awe a notch or two when going against him. . . . I had never thought him much of a judge of poetry. . . . I already thought there were totalitarian tendencies in all this but had not yet found the nerve to say so: hence the strained tone, of respect trying to conceal repulsion." Similarly "D. H. Lawrence in Transit" (1972) is pretty devastating, but perhaps not as devastating as it would be if James were to tackle Lawrence today.

The essay destroys Lawrence's claim to being a serious thinker but is reverent about his descriptive gifts: fair enough, although the reverence, deserved though it may be, seems suspiciously like a mere matter of giving the devil his due. Sure enough, James admits as much in the 1994 postscript: "I thought Lawrence was a greatly gifted writer. I just didn't think he was a great writer. To put it another way, I thought he could write but didn't like what he wrote." In reflecting on his treatment of Lawrence, though, James articulates an important principle of criticism, one that his fellow-critics, drunk with the joys of demolition, too often forget: "a limiting judgment of an artist should be offered only

after full submission to whatever quality made him remarkable in the first place.”

Qualified respect is all very well, but real passion inspires us, a principle illustrated by James’s essays on his heroes—Philip Larkin, Mark Twain, Federico Fellini, Primo Levi, and others. What he writes of Randall Jarrell is true also of himself, at his best: “We never feel, when reading him, that he is at his most concentrated when he is being most destructive. It is in the effort to draw our attention to merit that he achieves real intensity, and there are very few critics of whom that can be said.” The essay on Twain is a valuable reminder of the unique gifts of a writer so much a part of our mental furniture we have come to take him for granted: “Twain’s journalism is a daunting reminder that he was ready to lavish everything he had on everybody, every time. . . . [R]emarkably, his magic survived translation—indirect proof that it was his point of view that drove his style, and not vice versa. . . . [T]he America we like best sounds like him.”

James’s favorite writer, to judge from this book, is Philip Larkin, and the four essays on Larkin presented here serve as a fine guide not only to the poet’s aesthetic but to James’s as well. “Larkin’s readability seems so effortless that it tends to be thought of as something separate from his intelligence. But readability *is* intelligence. . . . He has no special poetic voice. What he brings out is the poetry that is already in the world.” It is not only Larkin’s crystalline clarity of expression that James admires, but his unpretentious, and *unportentous*, manner. “To look for a life-transforming theme, surely, is as self-defeating as to look for a life-enhancing one. Good poetry transforms and enhances life *whatever it says*.” This is a vitally important principle, one that makes a mockery of much modern critical work and, in the universities, of curriculum planning. Meaning, and form, derive from a central simplicity. Writing of Stevie Smith, James says that “she can deconstruct literature in the only way that counts—by constructing

something that feels as if it had just flown together, except you can’t take it apart.” The same is true of Larkin.

Again using Larkin as a touchstone, James writes of “a level of seriousness which only those capable of humour can reach.” This is a profound comment, and is linked with his corresponding low opinion of “the frolicsome prose of the incorrigibly humourless.” Humor in literature is not, except in the hands of rare geniuses, a matter of piling effect onto effect; it is the sure choice of the one perfect word, phrase, or image. James is himself a funny man (his review of the absurd Judith Krantz’s *Princess Daisy* had me laughing aloud from beginning to end), and the writers and artists he loves the most are all funny, though they are not necessarily “humorists.” The artist will not achieve true seriousness by taking himself seriously, as James points out in his discussion of John Le Carré’s later novels, “Go Back to the Cold!”

[G]enerally the book has been covered with praise—a response not entirely to be despised, since *The Honourable Schoolboy* is so big that it takes real effort to cover it with anything. At one stage I tried to cover it with a pillow, but there it was, still half visible, insisting, against all the odds posed by its coagulated style, on being read to the last sentence. . . . [Smiley] has been called the most representative character in modern fiction. In the sense that he has been inflating almost as fast as the currency, perhaps he is.

One should turn, for contrast, to James’s greatly sympathetic treatment of Raymond Chandler, a genre writer who knew his place, however often he might have soared above it. Following his own rule that a good critic quotes from a writer “almost as creatively as the writer writes,” James presents a series of Chandler lines that go so far beyond our by now stereotyped impression of Chandlerese as to startle and charm us as Chandler must have done when he first appeared on the scene. Of Joseph P. Toad in *The Little Sister*: “The neck of his

canary-yellow shirt was open wide, which it had to be if his neck was going to get out." Fabulous! And what about the description of Jessie Florian's bathrobe in *Farewell My Lovely*? "It was just something around her body." "The thrill of his books," James comments, "was that they were so much better than they needed to be."

James, who has spent a large part of his career interviewing artists, writers, and performers, has a strong feeling for the contribution personality makes to the work of art. He doesn't confuse the artistic persona with the human one; he knows that to do so is a trap, and that the only really important version of the writer is the one that appears in the written work. But the artist's character enhances, or warps, the art. Gore Vidal, for instance, brilliant but vain, "sounds like an oracle even when he is wrong." Nabokov, even in translating his beloved Pushkin, was "incapable of being anybody's servant;" he "managed to make Pushkin sound like Nabokov." Worse, he made him sound like a Scrabble buff. Bertrand Russell's goofiness made it just the tiniest bit difficult to take his work seriously; if a movie were ever made of Russell's life, James suggested that the ideal actor would be Gene Wilder—except that even Wilder "has a bit too much gravitas for the role." Pier Paolo Pasolini's sexual vanity merged into the vanity of his work, so that it might have been a good thing, James suggests, that he died relatively young and was spared the indignities of aging. Otherwise, "What next? Charlus with his rouged cheeks? Aschenbach with his rinse? Rage, rage against the dyeing of the hair."

But the critic's job (I take care to avoid the pompous phrase "the Critical Task," which makes James snort in derision) is to evaluate the work without being terribly swayed by personal taste or distaste for its author. "What the true artist says from instinct, the true critic will hear by the same instinct. There may be more than instinct involved, but nothing real will be involved without it." Instinct, intelligence, recep-

tivity, a broad culture: each of these is vital in a critic; so too, he says, is one I found absolutely correct, "the capacity not to be carried away by a big idea" (a test he says Susan Sontag fails). In criticism as in art, a central simplicity is important; he cites Edmund Wilson, who managed to build a magnificent career without gimmicks, rigidity, reductive formulas, or hobbyhorses, as his ideal.

A public, however small, is what establishes a poem, or any other work of art, as worthwhile. . . . To the public's response there is always something that informed criticism can add, but it is never as much or as important as what the public has decided on its own account. Sensibility comes first and most, formal intellect last and least. . . . A good critic is always an ordinary reader in the first instance. A bad critic, not being that, is usually obliged to come up with an angle in order to stay in business.

James takes a certain pride in his own sanity, his own incapacity to be carried away by big ideas. He states that his chosen location, in London rather than in New York, the epicenter of contemporary culture, has helped him keep this detachment: "The center of the magnetic field is the wrong place to see the distortions it creates," he says, and cites Christopher Hitchens, Martin Amis, and Salman Rushdie as compatriots who have hazarded their artistic integrity in their eagerness to be where the action is. This is a little disingenuous. London is hardly a backwater—many people consider that it is still the center of the literary world—and in any case the English have always enjoyed playing Athens to America's Rome, a temptation which James, Aussie though he is by birth and upbringing, does not resist. But it must be said that in terms of keeping aloof from fashion, he has indeed stayed outside the magnetic field and retained a sense of proportion. His criticism is unusually fair, neither politically nor artistically partisan; he doesn't go in for

easy demolition jobs. His nose for the bogus is practically unerring. I found several judgments in *As of This Writing* that I disagreed with but was willing, because of James's great intelligence and powers of persuasion, to consider. There was only one that I found truly untenable: his contention that the coy *Charade* is a better movie than its great Hitchcock progenitor, *North by Northwest*. One foolish judgment in over six-hundred dense pages—it is quite an achievement.

“I will be a hero”

Edgar Vincent

Nelson: Love and Fame.

Yale University Press, 640 pages, \$35

reviewed by Robert Messenger

Decisive naval battles are the rarest of military engagements. The difficulty of finding and closing with your enemy has always meant that naval warfare is extended periods of boredom followed by short sharp battles from which the loser could usually slip away before total destruction.

Horatio Nelson gave the lie to this. His career reads as a successful effort not to beat his enemy, but annihilate him. The brief hours of his battles shifted the balance of power in Europe. Why Nelson was the most successful naval commander in history becomes abundantly clear in Edgar Vincent's new biography. It is the best modern book on the admiral and one of the best biographies of its kind that I have read.

Born to a provincial Norfolk rector in 1758, Horatio Nelson early believed his career was a call to glory. Writing an account of his life in 1799, he recalled a youthful vision he had aboard ship while recovering from malaria:

A sudden glow of patriotism was kindled within me, and presented my king and country as my patron. My mind exulted in the idea. “Well then” I exclaimed, “I will be a

hero, and confiding in Providence I will brave every danger.”

This ambition manifested itself first in physical courage. At every engagement, Nelson personified the sailor's saying of “Aft the most honour, forward the better man.”

The formative influence in Nelson's life was his maternal uncle, Maurice Suckling, a navy captain. In 1770, at the age twelve, the young Horatio begged for and received a place on his uncle's ship, going up the side of HMS *Raisonnable*. Of the thirty-five years left to him, twenty-eight were spent at sea. With the help of his uncle, who had risen to become comptroller of the Royal Navy, Nelson rose through the ranks to captain.

In 1793, after five years of peace and a frustrating search for perferment, France declared war on England and Holland, and Nelson got his ship, the *Agamemnon*. He served in the Mediterranean under Admirals Hood and Jervis, who both appreciated his aggressiveness and grasped how to handle him: Nelson needed constant recognition of his work. The Mediterranean fleet's service was not glorious until Valentine's Day 1797, when Jervis and his fifteen ships-of-the-line caught eighteen Spaniards off Cape St. Vincent. Jervis's battle plan failed, and it was the quick action of Nelson and Thomas Troubridge, two captains who instinctively sensed how the attack must go, that turned an indifferent engagement into a victory. Nelson's star had risen.

Cape St. Vincent was a victory, but not over the French. A vast army was being readied in Toulon, and the great question was where Bonaparte and his troops were headed. In 1798, Nelson was given an independent command in the Mediterranean to destroy France's armada. Bad weather let the French escape from Toulon, and bad luck—Nelson's frigates missed the rendezvous, leaving his fleet blind—made the chase fruitless for weeks. But, finding the French fleet in Aboukir Bay on the Nile, Nelson fulfilled his mission.

It was dusk and the French were anchored against the shore, confident their

position was strong enough to repel any assault. They were wrong. Nelson never feared shallow water and without hesitation struck the French from both sides and through the middle of their line. What resulted was as complete a victory as any in the annals: eleven of the thirteen French ships-of-the-line were destroyed or captured. The war in the Mediterranean was effectively over: India safe, French domination of Italy threatened, Bonaparte trapped.

No admiral in the age of sail had been able to overcome the limitations of operational command. In battle, a commander was akin to us in our living rooms, watching distant events unfold and helplessly awaiting news. Nelson used inspiration and preparation to assure that battles unfolded as he wanted. He spent the long stretches of time that characterized fleet work—blockading, convoy protection, foraging—teaching his officers to act in union under any contingency of battle.

The Battle of the Nile was a shining moment in a dark year for England—the Irish had risen and the French were victorious everywhere. But instead of ordering Nelson home to recuperate from a head wound and receive due recognition, the admiralty sent him to deal with the duplicitous Neapolitan court. The king was viewed as an important ally in the coalition Pitt was trying to build. Nelson was thrown into the intrigue, and here began his famed love affair with Emma Hamilton, the wife of the British ambassador. She was an exceptional woman who had risen from the bottom—first by her body and then by her active mind—and Nelson was overwhelmed by her attentions during his convalescence. The Nile made him a Hero and Emma brought him love—something he had not found in his marriage. The rest of his life can be seen as a dual attempt to achieve recognition—money and patronage—for his military achievements and to formalize his relationship with Emma.

In 1801 Nelson was sent to Denmark to break up the Northern Alliance that had formed against England. He gained control

of the campaign from his ineffectual superior and won at Copenhagen, but due to political miscalculation the campaign was not viewed as a victory by the public. Again, Nelson felt done down by his superiors.

He was also beset by financial worries, by guilt over his wife, by a desire to live with Emma and their newborn daughter Horatia, and by a fervent need to be recognized at his actual worth by the government. The public adulated him and life as a public man only drove up his considerable expenses. This section of Vincent's book makes painful reading as the woeful letters almost overshadow the greatness of the naval officer.

When the Peace of Amiens failed in 1802, Nelson was given full command. He had no trouble separating himself from the stupor of sensual love. He built his fleet into the most disciplined of units. The whole of Nelson's effort was to bring the French to battle. Finally, on October 21, 1805, the combined French and Spanish fleets met the English at the western mouth of the Straits of Gibraltar. In the battle off Cape Trafalgar, nineteen of the enemy's thirty-three ships were captured or destroyed with no British losses. Vincent's telling of Trafalgar is stirring, but too brief. (It does not compare to John Keegan's superb, almost broadside by broadside, account in his *Price of Admiralty*—a book that is the right companion to this biography.) Shot by a sniper's bullet, Nelson died during Trafalgar, but he lived long enough to know the outcome—characteristically he was chagrined that they had not taken twenty ships. His work was done; from then on Napoleon would concentrate on continental campaigns—places he could march—and British naval mastery would not again be challenged until the 1890s.

Edgar Vincent has served immortal Nelson well. He has given just enough of tactics while serving the man up whole for those who favor biography over tactical study. I can imagine no better life of one of history's greatest captains.

Uncommon pilgrims

Paul Elie *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage.* Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 555 pages, \$27

reviewed by Mary Ellen Bork

Lionel Trilling once lamented that our age has few “representative figures,” people who live their visions as well as write them. In his first book, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, Paul Elie—an editor at Farrar, Straus & Giroux—presents four Catholic writers who did live their visions and who successfully dramatize the religious questions posed by the nihilistic, secular culture of mid-twentieth-century America. Elie’s four subjects—the French-born monk Thomas Merton, the left-wing activist Dorothy Day, and the novelists Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor—form a disparate group. Yet all were keen observers of life and society, all wrote out of their own struggles with belief and unbelief. Elie’s decision to tell their stories chronologically is one strength of the book. By continually moving back and forth among the writers, he is able to highlight various patterns, similarities, and contrasts in their lives and their writing. Among other things, he shows that for these writers the activities of reading and writing were themselves redemptive.

All four were assiduous readers. All found that reading literature clarified their religious sense as well as their artistic vision. Thomas Merton—whose spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (1948) was a bestseller—found his way into the Church by following his attraction to French medieval thought and art. From the philosopher Etienne Gilson he learned of a God he could believe in, and from medieval art he gained the sense of order that his restless soul craved. He and Dorothy Day were both socialists, Merton (1915–1968) a rebel against bourgeois society, Day (1897–1980) an enemy of a capitalist economy. She formed her moral vision reading Russian novelists and lived it by

founding a New York hospitality center for the poor.

Merton settled into an austere life as a monk whose vow of silence did not prevent him from writing voluminously: an expression of his garrulous nature, perhaps, as well as an expression of his effort to renew monastic life in modern culture by finding ways to share the monastic experience with others. Dorothy Day, whose unhappy marriage gave her an only child, lived among New York’s tenement poor and pursued the idea that only saints could reform society. In her books, her autobiography, and her annual fund-raising appeals for the newspaper *The Catholic Worker*, she promoted anarchism and pacifism as the best way to live the Gospel. She never changed her radical views but her moral vision expanded as she pursued personal holiness. New York’s Cardinal O’Connor proposed her candidacy for sainthood in 1997.

Walker Percy (1916–1990), a Southerner from a distinguished family, gave up the practice of medicine in order to diagnose the existential lostness of the modern person, to read philosophy, and to write novels about finding the self by getting out of the self. In *The Moviegoer* (1961), Binx Bolling, a New Orleans stock-and-bond broker, suffers a special kind of angst. He finds daily life unfulfilling and discovers his real life at the movies and watching other people. He is not a traditional believer but lives what Flannery O’Connor called a “kind of sub-religion which expresses its ultimate concern in images that have not yet broken through to show any recognition of a God who has revealed Himself.” Binx is a post-modern pilgrim, seeking signs of reality but unable to analyze what he finds.

Flannery O’Connor (1925–1964) was a Georgian of fiercely independent disposition who created similar characters struggling with belief and unbelief drawn from the country people she knew. She traced her interest in the grotesque and freaks to her childhood and her chicken that could walk forward and backward, an exploit filmed by

Pathé news. In *Wise Blood* (1952), Hazel Motes is a veteran who founds his own religion, the Church without Christ. Motes does not want any Lord to redeem him and yet craves religious experience. He is, says Elie, “the postwar American pilgrim . . . trapped between belief and unbelief, torn between the promised land of religious faith and the fallen world of his own experience.” O’Connor drew out-sized characters for readers who needed to be startled out of their ennui. Elie observes that, half a century later, *Wise Blood* is less dated and more powerful than most other American novels of 1952.

In some ways, the strength of Elie’s procedure is also its weakness. The chronological mosaic he builds is sometimes revealing, sometimes a bit tiresome and forced. Is it really significant that O’Connor went off to Yaddo in Saratoga Springs the same week that Percy bought a house in Covington, Louisiana? I doubt it. Still, by the end of the book, Elie’s balancing of the details of four lives has the cumulative effect of connecting the writers in new and engaging ways. We learn that these like-minded writers were aware of each other’s work and in some cases were influenced by it.

Percy found himself indebted to O’Connor’s sense of character and her colorful language. When he won the National Book Award in 1962 she telegraphed him, “I’m glad we lost the [Civil] War and you won the National Book Award. I didn’t think the judges would have that much sense but they surprised me.” Anyone familiar with Percy’s novels or essays can imagine how he would have savored O’Connor’s tart judgment that

the moral sense has been bred out of certain sections of the population, like the wings have been bred off of certain chickens to produce more white meat on them. This is a generation of wingless chickens, which I suppose is what Nietzsche meant when he said God was dead.

As Elie observes, O’Connor spoke in the

“common language of the South: familiar, colloquial, allusive of a shared history, suspicious of outsiders.”

The religious vision of the four writers that Elie discusses seems even clearer today than when first broached. At the beginning of her career, Flannery O’Connor, the most original of Elie’s writers, struggled with the question of how to integrate her religious passion and her fiction. Should her characters be virtuous? Should their stories have only happy endings? She learned from the philosopher Jacques Maritain that a religious writer can choose any subject. What matters to the religious artist is not subject matter per se but the technical and artistic demands of his craft. O’Connor came to understand that she could be true to her religious convictions and still write about country people and freaks.

Merton, Day, O’Connor, and Percy were religious artists in the sense that faith influenced their vision—not that they wrote only about religious subjects. Merton did write about his life in the monastery and the search for contemplation with a deprecatory style that engaged the reader in his search. And Day always described her advocacy for the poor—sit-ins, marches, fasting—as a way of serving God and the people He loved, the poor. O’Connor saw herself as a regional writer called “to observe our fierce and fading manners in the light of an ultimate concern.” She died of lupus at the age of thirty-nine having offered a disbelieving society the vision she cultivated, an “enlarged view of the human scene.”

Percy lived through the change of the old-time religion. “The churchgoer was giving way to the moviegoer, and in years to come the churchgoer and the moviegoer, though related, would be strangers to each other.” Believers can no longer float along buoyed up by a friendly culture but must deal with hostility, misunderstanding, and solitude. There is no Christendom any more. All believers are wayfarers now, seekers, looking for signs and rumors of angels.

Elie's erudition, literary analyses, and extensive notes give this "American pilgrimage" a power to evoke the cultural climate of the 1960s. He finds less to criticize than I would in Merton and Day's enthusiasm for the Catholic peace movement—a movement, alas, that seems to be gaining favor among Church leaders. Readers of *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* will experience four sophisticated writers who demonstrate that in the midst of a hostile culture and slouching beasts still advancing toward Bethlehem it is possible to identify the path that leads to fulfillment and to faith.

Hail, Muse! Etc.

Fiona MacCarthy

Byron: Life and Legend. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 674 pages, \$35

reviewed by Paul Dean

George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788–1824) is a "Romantic poet." That tells us little, for Romanticism meant different things to different poets. For Wordsworth it was the morality of mountains, for Coleridge metaphysical musings, for Keats the stimulation of the senses. For Byron it was luxuriating in secret sins. The "Byronic hero"—Childe Harold, the Giaour, Manfred—is dark, brooding, and thrillingly wicked, all the more so in that we are never quite sure what he has done. As Fiona MacCarthy shows in this splendid book, that applied to Byron himself in his lifetime. *Byron: Life and Legend* was published in Britain by John Murray, seventh in line from Byron's own publisher of that name (the house has now, alas, been bought out by a conglomerate). Successive Murrays imposed censorship on Byron's biographers, from the first, Thomas Moore in 1830, to Leslie Marchand in the 1950s. MacCarthy has worked under no such restrictions, and she has drawn on extensive manuscript and archive materials, some of them still kept at Murray's London office. The result is racy

and colorful, bursting with vitality and transmitting a real sense of the Regency, a period of British history distinguished by its combination of the extravagant, the exhibitionist, and the tawdry, a weird interval between the demise of Augustan order and the descent of the Victorian carapace of respectability.

For a future luminary of the Regency, Byron could hardly have had a better, or worse, start. He was born with a deformed right foot which inflicted psychological as well as physical pain; his father, "Mad Jack" Byron, died, possibly by his own hand, when the boy was three, and his relations with his feckless mother were tense; his upbringing was a mixture of strict Calvinism, brutality, and licentiousness. He was certainly abused physically, and possibly sexually, by his nurse; he was initially mocked for his lameness and backwardness at Harrow, his public school; he may have been seduced, when a teenager, by the (male) tenant of his ancestral home, Newstead Abbey; he had a series of relationships, not all platonic, with fellow-schoolboys; as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Cambridge, he fell in love with a fifteen-year-old chorister, John Edleston, the addressee of his poem "To Thyrsa":

Ours too the glance none saw beside;
The smile none else might understand;
The whisper'd thought of hearts allied,
The pressure of the thrilling hand;

The kiss, so guiltless and refined
That Love each warmer wish forebore;
Those eyes proclaim'd so pure a mind,
Even passion blush'd to plead for more.

Whether or not it did is left delicately ambiguous, but there is nothing rakish in the tone here. When Edleston died of consumption in 1811, aged twenty-one, Byron was heartbroken. At his death he was still wearing a ring the boy had given him.

Byron's psychosexual coordinates were fixed by these experiences: his hatred of religious hypocrisy and cant, his combined

yearning for, and fear of, emotional commitment, his suspicion of predatory females, his excitement at the amatory chase and his boredom after the capture. Reversing the emphasis of previous biographies, MacCarthy plausibly argues that Byron's crucial relationships were with boys rather than women. Psychologically this would be, I suggest, because he associated the boys with his memories of himself first as a victim, then as a protector/patron, whereas his defining experiences with women (his mother and his nurse) cast them as untrustworthy exploiters. His later incestuous affair with his half-sister Augusta is a symbolic exaction of revenge for this, while equally demonstrating his dependence on the familiar and "safe." The boys in his life called forth feelings of tenderness, gentleness, admiration for fragile innocence, which were never unlocked by women. (Not that one should be too high-minded; Byron was physically active with both sexes.)

Poetically, the legacy of Byron's formative years is a compound of lyricism and melodrama corresponding to the blend of sentiment and posing in his personality, and producing verse which can be sententious, tedious, and overblown. He found his genius in satire, a mode which can hold emotional genuineness in solution whilst obliquely suggesting a morally or socially corrective impulse. His first commercial publication, *Hours of Idleness* (1807), is a pallid thing compared to his defense of it against lukewarm reviews, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), a rollicking production in heroic couplets more reminiscent of the roughness of Dryden than the urbanity of Pope, although it was the latter whom Byron idolized. This valuation is a product of modern taste; it may look obvious to us that *Beppo* (1818), *Don Juan* (1819–1824), and *The Vision of Judgment* (1822) outclass *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812), the interminable Eastern tales, or the Promethean closet drama *Manfred* (1817), but, as MacCarthy shows, that was not at all clear to Byron's

contemporaries. It was *Childe Harold* which made him famous overnight, and acquainted him with Lady Caroline Lamb, whose unstable temperament first excited and then wearied him. He trusted her with the secrets of his sexual history, to his subsequent regret, since she publicized them when the affair cooled, and they were ammunition for Byron's wife, Annabella Milbanke, when she demanded a legal separation. The marriage had been a disaster from the outset, developing into a bizarre ménage à trois with Byron's half-sister, Augusta. Regency England, unmoved by infidelity and adultery, was still capable of being shocked by homosexuality and incest; the swirling rumors ejected Byron permanently from the country in 1816. Amid the bleak grandeur of the Swiss mountains he wrote his most startlingly modern poem, "Darkness," an apocalyptic vision of cosmic extinction which MacCarthy interprets as a projection of his own mental state:

The waves were dead; the tides were in their
grave,
The Moon, their mistress, had expired before;
The winds were wither'd in the stagnant air,
And the clouds perish'd; Darkness had no
need
Of aid from them—She was the Universe.

MacCarthy follows Byron round Belgium, the Rhineland, and Venice, where he began *Don Juan* in 1818, working on it for the rest of his life. It is the greatest comic epic in English, greater even than Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, the only other work remotely like it. Here was a form (*ottava rima*) flexible enough to accommodate any tone or effect, a theme at once traditional (the *éducation sentimentale* of the libertine) and radical (morality as relative rather than absolute), a mode capable of grandeur or farce, rhodomontade or garrulous intimacy, satire or passionate sincerity: a poem, in short, which, like its author, was both committed to and detached from the contemporary world. Byron has a genius for comic bathos which is at the same time worldly-wise:

MacCarthy invokes Oscar Wilde as Byron's spiritual heir. One can see why: the flamboyant teasing, the narcissistic streak, the self-dramatization which can be mawkish but also perceptive, the insistence that art was a matter of style rather than principles; above all, the talent so complete that it blinded its possessor to his course of self-destruction. The great technical triumph of *Don Juan* is that Byron creates a narrative persona which can analyze his own contradictions and not be merely an expression of them, as his earlier, more solemn masks had been. The last completed cantos are a ferocious satire on Regency England, unsurpassed except by Dickens (who must surely have known the poem) in *Bleak House*:

(We notice, too, the Dickensian brilliance at comic names.) As with *Tristram Shandy*, the work could have gone on indefinitely had the author not died. It breaks off after fourteen stanzas of Canto XVII, which were found posthumously among his papers.

Byron had been caught up in the anti-Austrian revolutionary movement in Italy some years before he intervened in the Greeks' struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire. He had cut an indifferent figure in the House of Lords, but here was a chance to make a significant impact on international politics. He was assailed, again like Wilde, not only by *ennui*, but by a terror of pointlessness: in 1822, shaken by the deaths, in quick succession, of his five-year-old illegitimate daughter and of his great friend Shelley, he was roused to action. He lent the Greek government £4,000 and traveled to the strategically important town of Missolonghi (accompanied by the last of his idolized boys, Lukas Chalandritsanos). Fêted as a hero, he could indulge his lifelong tendency to compare himself to Napoleon. MacCarthy admires his patience in dealing with competing factions and the ugly reality of warfare; all dilettantism was renounced. He raised a private army for an assault on the Turkish-occupied town of Lepanto, but internal squabbles forced the abandonment of this project. On January 22, 1824, his thirty-sixth birthday, he wrote his last known major poem, which begins as a veiled complaint to the heartless Lukas: "Yet though I cannot be beloved/ Still let me love." The sad truth was, as MacCarthy observes, that the aging Byron was an unattractive figure, as much to himself as to others. The poem ends in stoic acceptance of "a soldier's grave" should that be the allotment of fate; but fate had other plans. Three months later, the revolution crumbling around him, Byron died in his bed, of an infection probably exacerbated by his doctors' over-investment in leeches; they extracted altogether 43 percent of his blood volume. His last coherent words were, "I must sleep now."

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rightly, that he would have found the Victorian age congenial (his ex-wife survived until 1860, and there is a pathetic photograph of her as a respectable dowager, her eyes haggard with boredom). His unnecessary death became the stuff of legend, indistinguishable from the careless heroism of his early literary creations. MacCarthy has a brisk chapter on his literary inheritance, though she misses his influence on the best of Tom Stoppard's plays, *Arcadia*. He was better appreciated and assimilated on the continent than in England, as we can see simply by setting *Eugene Onegin* against *Jane Eyre*. The Victorians were excited by the early, brooding Byron, and merely pained by *Don Juan*, whose meter is as hard to imitate as its mood; even W. H. Auden, no mean metrist, used rhyme royal rather than *ottava rima* in his "Letter to Lord Byron." Among modern practitioners of light verse, only the late Gavin Ewart came near to matching Byron's range and technical ingenuity, and political correctness has made a modern Byron virtually unthinkable.

MacCarthy ends her book with a macabre description of the opening of the Byron family vault in 1938 and the viewing of his partly skeletal remains by the local vicar and a party of select friends. One spectator reflected on the pathos of beholding "all that remained of one who had been young, handsome and the most famous man of genius of his age"; another noted the "quite abnormal development" exhibited, even in death, by the poet's phallus. Byron could not have wished for a more Byronic reaction.

Shorter notice

James Wood *The Book Against God*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 272 pages, \$24

In *Father and Son*, Edmund Gosse's great memoir of his Victorian childhood, he writes of the event that first made him aware of his own self as independent being—and set him on the path away from the faith of his father: "My Mother always

deferred to my Father, and in his absence spoke to me, as if he were all-wise. I confused him in some sense with God; at all events I believed that my Father knew everything and saw everything." One day, Gosse heard his father relate an anecdote of an occurrence at which mother and son had been present. "I remember turning quickly, in embarrassment, and looking into the fire. The shock to me was as that of a thunderbolt, for what my Father said 'was not true.'"

Gosse's work comes early to mind while reading James Wood's first novel, *The Book Against God*. Its narrator is a variation on the same theme. Thomas Bunting is the son of an Anglican minister. He is pursuing (and never quite completing) a Ph.D. in philosophy, but still regards his father with a combination of annoyance and awe. Though Thomas claims to have rarely seen him open a book, his father displays ready knowledge of everything from Montaigne to Schumann. "The mere display of that knowledge sufficed to subdue me," he writes, recalling a discussion they once had on some issue of morality:

I must have said something rash, for Peter calmly responded: "That's rather a post-modern idea, I think, this collapsing of all hierarchies." The argument ended there, for suddenly he was describing *my* thoughts to me! . . . He didn't need to read any books of postmodernism; he just absorbed this information swiftly and mercilessly.

For all his casual omniscience, however, what the father doesn't know is that his son has lost his faith. It is worse than that: He has become one of those who, in the words of Job, "desire to argue with God" and is secretly at work on a voluminous philosophical work he calls the "Book Against God" (his "BAG"). The BAG is Thomas's attempt to best his father and his faith; *The Book Against God* is the story of his frustration at his failure to do so.

Yet Wood's is not a merciless work like *Father and Son* or *The Way of All Flesh*, it is

rather a deeply comic novel and a clever inversion of a conventional narrative. Peter Bunting is not overbearing or Puritanical. He is kind to the poor and lonely of his parish, married happily to Thomas's mother, and has a healthy sense of humor. (He has affixed to each of his bibles a sticker reading, "This is an advance copy sent in lieu of a proof.") Wood recognizes that for the past century disbelief in God has been an easier alternative than belief for an intelligent person, that there is no great heroism inherent in the decision to disbelieve, and that the loss of faith frequently entails the loss of a great many other valuable things, as well.

Wood is in the peculiar situation for a first-time novelist of having a great deal of information about his own beliefs, on issues of both metaphysics and the creation of fiction, available to his readers. Over the past decade, he established himself as the premier young critic of English-language fiction—it is probably past time now to drop that "young." Among other admirable traits, he is one of few critics who still regularly engage the technical points of prose fiction, such as narrative distance, who is willing to take an author like John Updike to task over something as mundane as word choice.

Given his fondness for matters of mechanics, it should come as no surprise that *The Book Against God* is well-written. His writing stays in the service of character and does not worship at the cult of the sentence. The author's social commentary, both regarding his parent's Durham parishioners and Thomas's more sophisticated London friends, is precise and funny.

This humor, in particular, may seem surprising in a book whose central reference point is Job. But the hero of a comic novel is always a sort of Job, beset by his creator with trials and afflictions. Wood has fastened onto this parallel, and draws from it rich ironic effects. Thomas takes issue with

God (and Kierkegaard, whom he calls by the transliterative nickname "Churchyard") over what C. S. Lewis called the problem of pain—how can a God who loves us allow us to suffer?—but his own trials are, for the most part, amusingly minor, usually having to do with telling lies to get out of dinner engagements. There is more of Jim Dixon in him than of Ivan Karamazov.

Yet Thomas's course in the novel does parallel that of Job: By the end of it, he has lost his father, separated from his wife, and become alienated from his closest friend. (Only belatedly does he begin to see himself—and the growing obsession with his BAG—as the cause of most of these misfortunes.) Thomas even sarcastically describes his preoccupation with religious belief as a sort of physical affliction, a scab he can't get rid of. This is the closest he comes to explaining why, if he does not believe in God, he argues with him so fiercely.

The main, though minor, flaw of the novel is that Thomas does not argue particularly well. In the title essay of his book *The Broken Estate*, Wood wrote of how, at the age of fifteen, "I tore myself away from belief in God." *The Book Against God* seems in many ways to be a parody of his own adolescent certainties. In doing this, he perhaps hoped to insulate himself from what he considers a cardinal sin of fiction writing: the confusion of author and narrator (worst of all in the mind of author himself). No reader is likely to confuse Thomas Bunting with James Wood for the simple reason that he is nowhere near as intelligent; Wood has made him in his image, but withheld the spark.

One will most likely not be able to accuse James Wood of intellectually holding back ever again. His willingness in this debut novel to attack his own pieties, along with those of everyone else, suggests that he is as honest an artist as he is a critic, and that his next will be worth waiting for.

—David Propson

Letters

The future of abstract art

To the Editors:

In "Does abstract art have a future?" (December 2002), Hilton Kramer speculates that it may not. He could be right. I am an abstract painter, however, and I would rather that he isn't.

Kramer points out that abstract painting has an "inevitably symbiotic relation to representational art" and that the larger question is "the fate of painting itself." He goes on to give examples of the complete absence of abstract painting in current high-level survey exhibitions.

His observations and conclusions are accurate. I maintain, however, that abstract and representational art are more than "symbiotically related"; at this point in art history, they are continuous. That is, we now understand that nothing is completely realistic and nothing is completely abstract, and the sharp distinction that was such a hot topic fifty years ago is now of little consequence. To a viewer of any sophistication it is no more important than red paint or green paint. The real division is not between realistic and abstract but between the traditional use of art as a vehicle for aesthetic apprehension and pleasure, and the current use of art for just about anything else. It is not a matter of medium or method but of attitude, not a matter of realistic painting or abstract painting or anything physical, but of what we ask art to do for us. It is not just abstract painting that is in trouble, but art itself.

The difference between abstract and representational art becomes explicit now only because

mainstream academic postmodernism insists on overt meaning and message in all art, and, simultaneously, derides and discourages intuitively derived aesthetic pleasure. This singles out abstract art for rejection not because it is non-representational, but because it declares by its character that it must be seen for aesthetic comprehension only. Realist painting can adapt. It can carry a postmodernist message. That's why we see more realist painting than abstract painting now. That's why the Museum of Modern Art, with exaggerated enthusiasm and more than just a suggestion that it is, after all, in favor of painting, puts on a major exhibit for Gerhard Richter, whose paintings are as chilling and lifeless and as heartlessly academic as any postmodernist pile of detritus anywhere.

The first panel discussion I ever took part in, entitled "Is Painting Dead?" was at NYU in 1966. It was chaired by Barbara Rose and included Donald Judd, Larry Poons, and Robert Rauschenberg. (Poons and I, of course, said "no," Judd, of course, said "yes," and Rauschenberg, typically, didn't really care and was funny). That was thirty-seven years ago. Painting hasn't died, and it won't die. It has borne great art for so long, and it retains so many methods and conventions useful for just that purpose, that it certainly cannot be said to be internally exhausted. Externally, it suffers in the cultural marketplace by its relative inability to accommodate the current regressive trend. But very good painting, and, yes, very good abstract painting, is being made and appreciated all over the place. It is not "movement abstraction" as Kramer calls it, not a singular,

concentrated crucible-type event that is seen as an entity and gets a name, but it is alive and well nevertheless. That's where the art is now, in reserve, biding its time. People are hungry for the real thing, for nourishment, not recipes or bitter medicine. We sense that there is something in art that brings out the best in ourselves, and we sense that we need it. If painting, abstract or representational or somewhere in between, can give it to us, we are going to want it back.

It will take a while for this to happen, but it will. Mainstream Postmodernist art is just too nasty, boring, and silly to last. How we came to this unfortunate condition is a long sad story which has been told well but incompletely by a few perceptive writers, and will, one day, be a favorite subject of doctoral dissertations, most of them in the fields of sociology and psychology rather than art history. Perhaps they will make comparisons between social revolutions and art revolutions, tracing from the time when revolution (innovation) brought a freer, better life (art), to a later time when revolution (innovation) brought tyranny (terrible art), always, in each case, abetted by so-called liberal intellectuals. Will they compare the eventual turn against repressive postmodernist academicism to the fall of Soviet Communism? I wouldn't be at all surprised.

Darby Bannard
Miami, Florida

Hilton Kramer replies:

As much as I loathe what Mr. Bannard characterizes as "repressive postmodernist academicism," I very much doubt that any intellectually competent historian will ever compare its eventual demise to "the fall of Soviet Communism." Postmodernism is certainly not a disaster of comparable magnitude, and to suggest otherwise is to trivialize one of the greatest disasters in human history. It may, however, be useful to compare Postmodernist art to the kind of Socialist Realism that was the official art style of the Soviet regime. But none of this has much to tell us about the future prospects of abstract

painting, which was the subject I was addressing in my essay "Does abstract art have a future?"

I don't think it clarifies matters, either, to declare that "we now understand that nothing is completely realistic and nothing is completely abstract." I deliberately avoided the very idea of "realism" in speaking of abstraction's symbiotic relation to representational art for that very reason. The *aesthetic* differences that separate abstract painting from representational painting may not matter to an abstract painter like Mr. Bannard, but it is my impression that these differences matter a lot to most representational painters, for whom the selection of a subject is often of vital *aesthetic* importance. I don't think it advances the discussion of abstract painting to dismiss such differences as unimportant.

The unsleeping eye

To the Editors:

As always, Anthony Daniels brings great expertise, literary skill, and moral authority to his article "I spy" (April 2003). Unfortunately the piece contains a serious error of fact.

Dr. Daniels writes that "no reference is given" for the statement in *The Unsleeping Eye* reducing the traditionally assigned role of the Okhrana in devising the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. In truth, a reference is given.

Approximately halfway down page 330, readers will find a note referring them to a fuller discussion of the subject. This discussion is contained in pages 203–215 of C. A. Ruud's and Sergei Stepanov's 1999 study, *Fontanka 16: The Tsar's Secret Police*.

It would be regrettable if anyone came away from Dr. Daniels's article with the impression that *The Unsleeping Eye* sought to minimize the historical impact of the *Protocols*' drivel. I say this as *The Unsleeping Eye*'s author.

R. J. Stove
Melbourne, Australia

Anthony Daniels replies:

Mr. Stove is correct, and I apologize.

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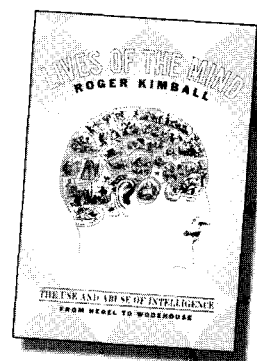


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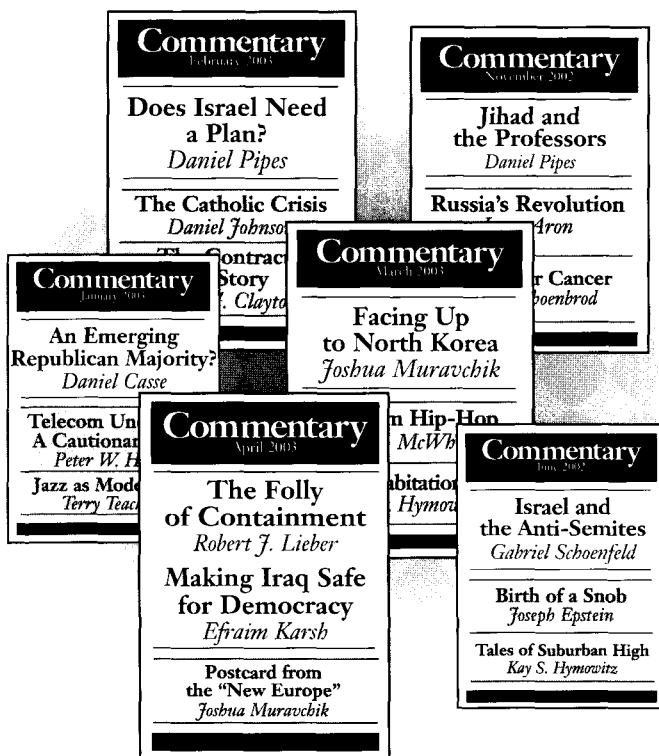
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